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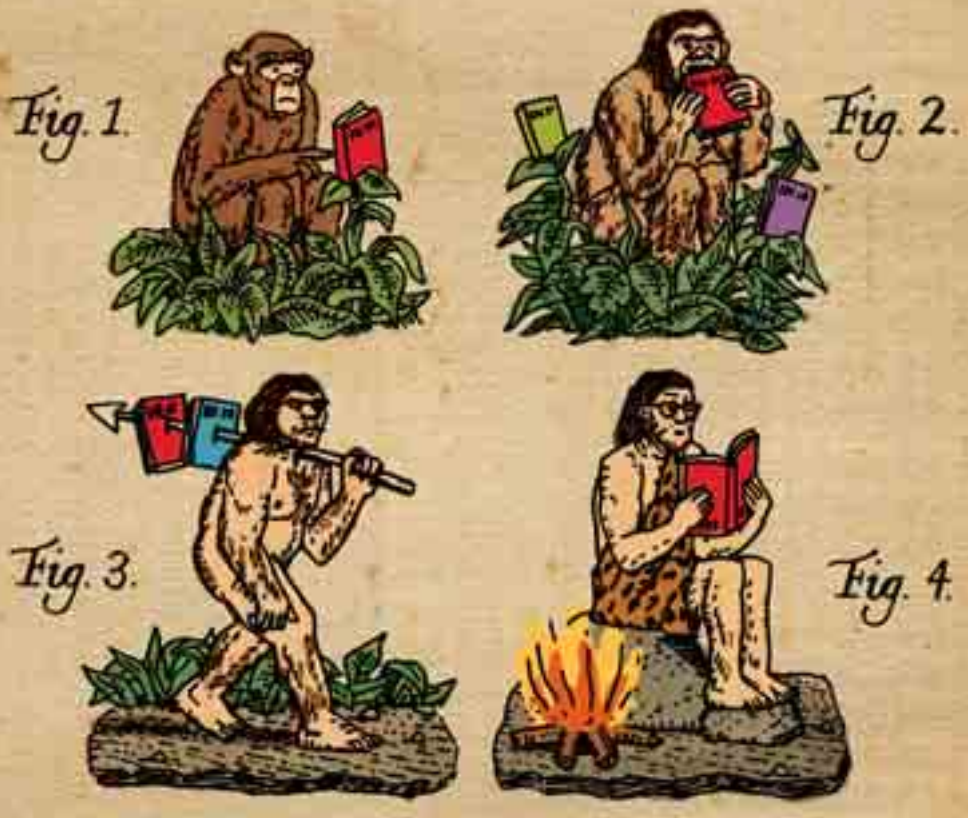

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ ON LITERARY DARWINISM

JUNE 8, 2009
TheNation.com

JANA PRIKRYL
ON THE KUNDERA CONUNDRUM

NATASHA WIMMER
ON JOSÉ MANUEL PRIETO

ELISABETH SIFTON
ON THE BOOK BUSINESS'S WOES

ANGE MLINKO
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AND MUCH MORE!

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Exchange

Vivian Gornick on James Wood

New York City

William Deresiewicz's attack on James Wood strikes the common reader—inclined neither to anoint nor denounce—as extraordinary, so extreme is the avalanche of accusatory prose that is being leveled at a critic of comparable age, education and ability ["How Wood Works," Dec. 8, 2008; "Letters," Jan. 5]. I happen to agree with Deresiewicz on every point he makes about Wood's criticism: it is narrowly aesthetic; it does worship at the wrong literary altar; and increasingly it sounds as though it is coming from a world other than the one the rest of us are squirming around in (herein lies its true weakness: that the work is not grounded in the emotional undercurrents of its own moment). Yet James Wood, champion of the now painfully inadequate realist novel, is indeed the most celebrated critic of this decade as well as the one before. Instead of writing thoughtfully about this singular development, Deresiewicz goes on the warpath, confusing symptom with cause so badly that by the end of the piece his subject begins to seem an innocent bystander.

Wood is charged with being an unhappily lapsed Christian who displaces onto novel-writing an inappropriate demand for moral (i.e., spiritual) accountability; at the same time, Deresiewicz praises the famous New York critics of some generations past for regarding literature in relation to politics and society. Yet Lionel Trilling was every bit as much a sermonizer as is Wood, declaring repeatedly that the novel had the sacred duty to serve the idea of the moral imagination because it alone could save us from ourselves. In fact, Wood and Trilling are almost exactly the same kind of conservative critic, the major difference between them being that Trilling had the edge because he was writing in a time when literary culture flourished: women and men read widely if not deeply—*The Liberal Imagination* sold a remarkable 70,000 copies when it was published in 1950—and looked happily to elegant criticism to cast light on the way they were living their lives. There were, however, even then, readers who looked upon Trilling as an aesthete and a moralizer and did not at all love his take on world, self or literature; for them, he never spoke persuasively to what Wallace Stevens called "this iron solitude"—the penetrating psychological truths behind modernist despair. No matter. Trilling's convictions were the middlebrow convictions of his time—and he linked them brilliantly to novel-reading.

Today, literary culture is not only not flourishing, it is on the defensive: very few read (or for that matter, write) to save their lives, as people did fifty years ago, and no critic, of whatever stripe, can be immune from the knowledge that he or she is working at a moment when the very act of holding a book in one's hands seems like it might soon become an artifact. Yet, as Randall Jarrell once said, whether we know it or not, without literature human life is animal life—and Wood is the critic who still takes this proposition most to heart. As Deresiewicz acknowledges, Wood goes on writing about literature "as if our souls depended on it, which for any serious reader, they do." And that, finally, is why he is celebrated.

It is not that Wood is necessarily smarter, or even better read, than half a dozen others—and God knows, his sense of mission is misplaced—it is simply that he writes about literature with unequaled passion in a time and place when the drive to make storytelling art seems imperiled. The content of his criticism may indeed be retrograde, separated as it is in so many ways from the actuality of our shared experience—and for this reason will probably not stand any test of time—but for now, his work is a holding action: a kind of bridge between an era in which the reading world was saturated in self-confidence and a time when it may yet again believe in itself. Wood's readers—the same people who would have been Trilling's readers—do not need to engage with what he is actually saying as much as they need to rhapsodize over the gorgeousness of his

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Obama's Tortured Turn

In the darkest days of the Bush/Cheney years Barack Obama declared, "Making government accountable to the people isn't just a cause of this campaign—it's been a cause of my life for two decades." No one expected Obama to reveal all the secrets of the temple when he became president. But Americans did expect him to favor transparency and accountability. Unfortunately, with each passing week he stumbles deeper into the thicket of secrecy he promised to clear away.

EDITORIAL

The administration's reversal of its agreement with the ACLU to release photos of detainee abuse by military and intelligence agents is unsettling and wrongheaded. Obama now argues, as his predecessor did, that revealing the truth "will further inflame anti-American opinion" and potentially endanger US troops. But this logic assumes that anger at the United States is provoked by photos—not the crimes they depict or the impunity they imply. Have these crimes been fully investigated and the perpetrators held accountable? Have adequate steps been taken to put an end to such abuses?

Answering these questions affirmatively and conclusively would be the best way to improve America's standing in the world. As the ACLU's Anthony Romero suggests, "Only by looking squarely in the mirror, acknowledging the crimes of the past and achieving accountability can we move forward and ensure that these atrocities are not repeated." Obama has asserted that this reckoning has already taken place, that the people involved "have been identified, and appropriate actions have been taken." But we can only gauge the veracity of his claim through a public airing of all the files on detainee abuse. The administration's stonewalling, however, breeds suspicion that justice and accountability are still out of reach.

Obama's decision becomes all the more disturbing when seen in the context of his administration's announcement that it will "modify" rather than abandon the use of military commissions. Candidate Obama described these as a "legal black hole" that "undermines the very values we are fighting to defend." He wisely argued, "Our Constitution and our Uniform Code of Military Justice provide a framework for dealing with the terrorists." President Obama has abandoned that wisdom.

Obama has broken with the past by announcing plans to shutter Guantánamo, releasing torture memos and rejecting waterboarding. But he muddies the waters by compromising on torture photos and military commissions, and by rejecting calls for an independent investigation of the Bush/Cheney administration's authorization of the use of torture. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that it used torture to extract "confessions" that provided false justification for invading Iraq—a grave accusation that deserves a full public hearing.

The prospects for a muscular Congressional inquiry have been blunted by Republican suggestions that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi approved Cheney's schemes. Pelosi has pushed back with charges that the CIA deceived her, demands for the disclosure of the briefings and a renewed call for an independent commission on Bush-era torture. Only an independent panel—perhaps made up of former judges afforded the authority to compel testimony, assign blame and propose prosecutions—will be able to achieve accountability. As candidate Obama rightly said, Americans want to trust their government. If President Obama wants to restore that trust, he must rededicate himself to pursuing transparency and accountability, the great promise of his 2008 campaign.

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Jeremy Brecher & Brendan Smith: Trials of Ehren Watadah

Noam Chomsky: The torture memos

Slideshow: *The Nation* at war

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VideoNation: Rep. Donna Edwards on progressives in Congress

Bankers' Paradise

No matter how discredited and despised Wall Street executives may be across the country, their clout remains unrivaled on Capitol Hill. Judging from how much traction the American Bankers Association gets with lawmakers, you'd think it was an organization devoted to the interests of puppies and adorable children.

It's one thing for the banks to maintain a broken status quo, but it's another for them to work to break things further, by pushing an industry-friendly change through Congress in the midst of the crisis. Recently, in the case of mark-to-market accounting, that's just what they did.

The idea behind mark to market is pretty straightforward. If a bank owns, say, a mortgage-backed security, it must enter the value of that security in its books at the price the security can fetch on the market. If the security can get 80 cents on the dollar, it goes down as .80 in the books. If it can get only 20 cents, it goes down as .20. The standard enforces transparency by making banks sync their internal valuations with external prices.

Banks have whined about mark to market ever since it was codified in 2006. But it wasn't until last spring, as the subprime crisis gathered steam, that they began beating the drums for a change. They complain that the current panic has frozen the markets for many of their esoteric securities, artificially depressing the prices and therefore making their balance sheets look far worse than they really are.

The week after Lehman Brothers failed, as both conservative and progressive House members balked at the initial TARP plan, a number of lawmakers became convinced by onetime FDIC chair William Isaac that mark-to-market accounting was the culprit and that simply suspending or abolishing it was all that was needed to see us through.

They were ignored at the time, but the conservative noise machine ran with the idea (op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal*, rants on CNBC) and the banks kept working over Congress.

Finally, in a deft bit of bank-shot lobbying, the American Bankers Association, the Chamber of Commerce and others pressured the House Financial Services subcommittee on capital markets, insurance and government-sponsored enterprises to convene a hearing in March on accounting standards. There, members of both parties browbeat representatives of the independent Financial Accounting Standards Board for excessive fidelity to their precious rules. (Representative Randy Neugebauer of Texas: "Don't make us tell you what to do. Just do it. Just get it done.") Three weeks later, after a truncated process, the five-member FASB voted 3 to 2 for changes that would relax mark-to-market requirements. The two dissenting board members issued a minority report warning that the new rules could help hide losses and impair long-term economic growth.

So, in the midst of a global financial crisis largely abetted by the opacity of bank balance sheets, Congress, at the behest of Wall Street, bullied FASB into changing the rules so companies could make their balance sheets *more* opaque.

If you believe that collective manias can produce systematic

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mispricing (like the housing bubble), you won't find the banks' complaints implausible. But whatever drawbacks there might be with mark to market, the alternative—allowing banks to decide what their securities are worth—is certainly worse. "My fear is that you can't trust the banks to decide if the loan is going to be impaired," said a hedge-fund analyst who has studied the issue.

The technical merits of the accounting change aside, the procedural precedent—Congress stepping in to push a change in accounting standards—is far more disturbing. There aren't many industries able to manipulate the measurements used to assess their worth. "There's a heck of a lot of folks in Washington that mistake standards as policy," one FASB official told me. "It's not policy. It's about measurement."

Democratic Representative Alan Grayson of Florida, who opposed the change, made precisely this point during the hearing, joking that changing accounting rules to deal with depreciated assets was like dealing with cramped airline seating by redefining the size of an inch.

The partial relaxing of the standards was a victory for the banks, but they're still not satisfied; they continue to push the committee for another hearing and more rule-relaxing. And there is no organized, powerful opposition to their demands. In the case of mark to market, the banks faced the opposition of institutional investors who control more than $3 trillion, not to mention Tim Geithner and Ben Bernanke. They still won.

"These members of Congress are being told what it is the banks want them to hear without having an effective counter," says Allen Weltmann, a senior adviser at FASB. "It's not unique to this issue—it's typical of Washington on matters like this." In the absence of broad-based organized opposition, the president stands as just about the only possible counterbalance. The one legislative battle the banks have lost, over a credit card reform bill recently passed by both houses, was also the only bill on which the White House expended any real political capital. But the president, to put it charitably, tends to pick his battles, so relying on the White House isn't a strategy for success. Battles over the future of finance capitalism continue to be shockingly one-sided affairs. Unless and until this dynamic changes, nothing else will.

CHRISTOPHER HAYES

Healthcare Bottom Lines

COMMENT

While reiterating White House support for a public health insurance plan that could compete with private insurers, health reform director Nancy-Ann DeParle said the controversy over this plan was fueled by a lack of information. "People aren't so clear about what it is," she said, adding that she believed there were "policy ways of getting around some of the objections" and creating a "public plan that everyone could agree to." This seems to have become the guiding strategy of the Senate's Democratic leadership. In April the Senate Finance Committee kicked off its discussions with an outline that included four configurations of a public plan, which ranged from a "Medicare-

Noted.

TERRORISM AND TEA PARTIES: The oddly controversial **Rightwing Extremism** report, issued by the **Department of Homeland Security** on April 7, was officially withdrawn by Secretary **Janet Napolitano** in mid-May. The nine-page report was a routine threat assessment issued to law enforcement and counterterrorism officials that warned of the potential for a rise in homegrown terrorists. It concluded that the combination of an economic downturn and the election of the first African-American president could cultivate a right-wing "resurgence in radicalization and recruitment," including among disgruntled veterans.

Conservatives immediately claimed that the threat assessment was a politically motivated attack on Republicans. Texas Representative **John Carter** suggested that the report was evidence of "a level of contempt for a healthy democracy" and demanded Napolitano's ouster, even though the assessment was initiated during the Bush administration. Columnist **Michelle Malkin** wrote that "the piece of crap report…is a sweeping indictment of conservatives"—this despite the fact that the assessment never once used the word "conservative."

When it was revealed that DHS had released a similar report on left-wing extremists three months earlier, claims of bias gave way to support for supposedly maligned veterans. The right-wing threat assessment drew unconvincing, and some said offensive, parallels between the present and the mid-'90s, when **Timothy McVeigh**, a veteran of the Gulf War, staged the second deadliest terror attack in US history. While Napolitano subsequently conceded that the report "should not have gone out," the overblown Republican reaction to it is nonetheless significant.

Conservatives' response—which began with outrage over a DHS report focused on "threats from white supremacist and violent antigovernment groups" and concluded with calls for a Congressional inquiry and a lawsuit being filed by the **Thomas More Law Center** at the behest of shock jock **Michael Savage**—suggests that either Republicans did not read the threat assessment closely or that there really is something to all their incendiary, inchoate "Tea Party" ranting. We will soon find out: Napolitano has promised that the report is in the process of being "replaced or redone in a much more useful and much more precise fashion." CORBIN HIAR

ESSAY ASSAY: *The Nation* is accepting submissions for our 2009 Student Writing Contest, sponsored by the **BIL Charitable Trust**. We're looking for original, thoughtful student voices to answer this question: how has the recession affected you, your family or someone you know? All high school and college students are eligible. Essays should not exceed 800 words. Winners will receive $1,000, and their essays will be published in *The Nation*. Entries accepted through May 31. Submit to studentprize@thenation.com. Info at TheNation.com/student.

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like option" to one that would be administered through agents that would act much like private HMOs.

Now that we're moving from a discussion about principles to a fight over specifics, it's important for supporters of the public plan to be clear about what elements cannot be compromised if the plan is to be a tool for fixing our healthcare system. As the debate unfolds, here are the top three points to watch:

1. *The public plan must rein in costs.* This, proponents agree, is the most important part of a public plan. Not surprisingly, it is also the most controversial.

The Medicare program—the ideal public plan to many progressives—pays providers less than private plans do, because its size gives it tremendous market power. Providers howl that Medicare rates are too low (they've already succeeded in getting annual bumps from Congress). The most aggressive public plan proposals would reimburse providers at the same rate that Medicare does.

Senate Democrat Charles Schumer of New York has taken the lead in trying to forge a compromise that could win over moderates, promising "a level playing field" between the public plan and private insurance. While progressive advocates are not rejecting his plan out of hand—they even think it could produce a useful compromise—there are two provisions that could wind up gutting the public option. Schumer rules out requiring that providers who accept Medicare patients also take public plan patients. Some believe such a requirement is the only way to ensure that the public option has the market power to get lower rates with enough participating providers. Schumer would also have the public plan pay more than Medicare. The public plan could still bring down costs by paying somewhere between Medicare rates and those of private insurers (the more liberal House is reportedly considering such a structure), but if lawmakers settle on a requirement that the public plan pay prevailing market prices, the point of a public plan will have been largely lost.

"It's got to have the ability to hold down rates—to me that's the critical part of it," says Urban Institute economist Linda Blumberg. It defeats the purpose to say, "We have a public plan option but we're going to do everything we can to increase its cost so we can have a level playing field."

2. *The public plan must fix uncompetitive markets.* Even if a public plan doesn't have the most aggressive cost containment powers, it can make a difference simply by being allowed to compete fairly where local markets have failed. In Iowa, for example, home to the Finance Committee's senior Republican senator, Charles Grassley, a single company controls 71 percent of the insurance market. Many other states are similarly uncompetitive, which creates several problems. There is no penalty on insurers for raising rates or trimming benefits, because patients have nowhere better to go. Since dominant insurers can protect their profits by raising premiums, they do not have to negotiate as intensely over the rates they pay providers. They also do not need to worry about runaway administrative costs, which can consume as much as 30 percent on some plans. Competing against a public plan, Iowa's private insurers would be forced to earn business based on cost and service and find profits by improving efficiency and getting better value for the benefit dollar.

3. *The public plan must change the way medicine is practiced.* In the long run, the public plan can do the most to promote savings by changing the payment system so medicine is practiced more cost-effectively. An estimated $700 billion a year—one in three healthcare dollars—goes to treatments that have not been shown to improve outcomes. Crafting a reimbursement scheme to favor treatments that work, however, is not easy. The public plan can make it part of its core mission to pioneer these reforms and lead the market.

Of course, many of the most powerful healthcare interests are likely to fight a public plan tooth and nail, no matter how hedged it becomes. Indeed, at this writing, the insurer Blue Cross Blue Shield was reportedly preparing TV ads targeting a public plan, even though it had been making nice with the White House on healthcare reform. Democrats seeking a compromise on this issue must remember that a public plan is a tool for fixing the healthcare market so that all Americans can afford the care they need. If they're going to fight for such a plan, it should be one that actually helps accomplish that goal. J. LESTER FEDER

J. Lester Feder, a freelance journalist based in Washington, DC, covers politics, faith and popular culture, and is a regular contributor to Columbia Journalism Review*'s Campaign Desk.*

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

On Accusations That Nancy Pelosi and Others Were Briefed on Bush Administration Torture

When evil deeds catch up with you,
Your best defense is, "You're one, too."

Pakistan's Missing Peace

Peshawar

The Pakistani army's operation in the Swat Valley is the most serious in five years of selective counterinsurgency against the local Taliban. The scale of the campaign, and of the humanitarian catastrophe it has unleashed, is immense. In two weeks, more than a million civilians have fled the fighting, with tens of thousands in tent cities on torrid plains. Some 15,000 soldiers—including commandos—are battling 5,000 guerrillas in mountain redoubts or in heavily mined cities like Mingora.

COMMENT

The war is the fruit of a failed peace process, backed by the army and civilian government but decried by the United States as an "abdication" that allowed insurgents to move within sixty-two miles of Islamabad. But is it a change? Or is it a continuation

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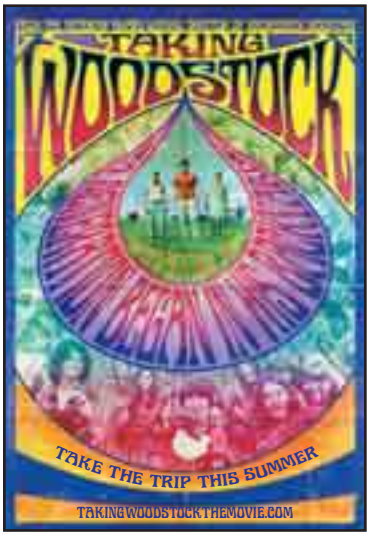

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of old Pakistani–US strategies that have failed in the past?

President Barack Obama says it's a change. "Over the last several weeks we've seen a decided shift in the Pakistan army's recognition that the threat from extremism is a much more immediate and serious one than the threat from India that they've traditionally focused on," he told *Newsweek* on May 13. Obama has skillfully convinced Congress that guerrillas on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border pose a "mortal threat" to the homeland, to America's losing war in Afghanistan and to its precarious, nuclear-tipped "ally" in Islamabad. On May 14 the House approved $1.9 billion in aid to Pakistan, $591 million more than requested—most of which was tagged to civilian governance rather than military hardware. Coupled with the May 19 pledge of $110 million in emergency relief, the bill triples civilian aid to Pakistan, supplying ballast to a government Washington knows is keeling from several storms.

The aid comes despite reports that Pakistan is expanding its nuclear arsenal and that its intelligence agency is "playing both sides" in Afghanistan. It also feeds a growing misperception in the Western media and among policy analysts that the Taliban and Al Qaeda are about to topple a nuclear state.

Yet it is incoherent. For Obama is also killing Pakistanis at a faster rate than Bush did. Sixteen Predator strikes on alleged Al Qaeda fugitives have crashed into the tribal areas this year, the latest on May 16 killing thirty people, including tribal militants, women and children. The relentless drone attacks have wiped out whatever good will Obama hoped to gain with the aid.

Refugees—caught between Taliban snipers and army choppers—say "dozens" of corpses lie unburied in fields or piled up in canals. A steady stream of soldiers are flown to military hospitals in Peshawar every day. "It's our war. It was imposed on us. That's why we have to fight it," said 23-year-old commando Nadir Khan, hit by sniper fire within four hours of his first skirmish.

This sentiment is new. Pakistanis have historically been hostile to military campaigns against the Taliban, casting them as "America's war." But most support the Swat offensive. More remarkably, so does Pakistan's main opposition party, electronic media and many Islamic leaders. For this "shift in recognition" Obama can thank the Taliban.

The clerics' savage rule in Swat was epitomized by the widely distributed video showing a 17-year-old girl being whipped for alleged "illicit relations." But it was compounded by their statements denouncing democracy and an independent judiciary as "infidel" systems that would be replaced by their vision of Sharia, or Islamic law. For a people who have spent large parts of the Islamic Republic's sixty-one-year existence struggling for democracy and an independent judiciary against US-backed dictatorships, this was a bit much.

But opinion is fickle. In the teeming refugee camps, support for the military operation is highest among those who suffered most from the Taliban: educated women and the urban middle class. "The Taliban shattered my hopes of becoming a doctor," spat Rukhsana, whose school in Mingora was bombed as part of the Taliban's drive against girls' education. But among the rural poor—the vast majority—the mood is ambivalent. "I don't know if this war is for us or to destroy us," said Sirajuddin, a village teacher. "I only know peace will come with Sharia. And only the Taliban can bring Sharia, not the army."

Also, many have seen this movie before. Twice in the past eighteen months the army has ousted the Taliban from Mingora, only to see them return. The Taliban not only outfought a derelict local government; they out-administered it, establishing "Islamic" courts, governors and militia. Even if the army vanquishes the Taliban in Swat, their leaders will likely find sanctuary in South Waziristan or other parts of the tribal belt along the border, or in Afghanistan. The powerhouse of the Pakistani Taliban would stay intact, along with the fear of their revival.

The army says "this time" it will hold recaptured territory until the civilian administration is robust enough to govern. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari has said that after Swat, the army will take the war to South Waziristan. But that is hyperbole. The overstretched army has about 150,000 men fighting on five fronts. Holding these territories and extending the fight to South Waziristan would be possible only if reinforcements came from the 250,000 men stationed on the eastern border with India. And that's not going to happen.

Ever since the Pakistani jihadi group Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked Mumbai in November, Islamabad and Delhi have been at war—cold, defused, but war nonetheless. Half of India's million-strong strike forces are near the Pakistan border or on the armistice line that divides Kashmir, the perennially disputed Himalayan territory claimed by both countries. Pakistani army chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani has reportedly told Washington he would move troops from the border if India did the same. Delhi's response was to mount three days of "war games." On May 15 Kayani told Parliament there would be no movement of troops from east to west, even though Washington had given "guarantees" against any Indian "misadventure." Parliament applauded.

In other words—Obama's comments notwithstanding—Pakistan's "threat recognition" hasn't changed. The tactical foe is the Pakistani Taliban, but the strategic adversary remains India. The Pakistani army will act ruthlessly against those who challenge the state, such as the Taliban in Swat and Al Qaeda–linked militants elsewhere. But it will not act against those who, like the Afghan Taliban, seek only a haven from which to fight America and NATO in Afghanistan. On the contrary, should the cold war on the eastern border become hot, such militants could again be proxies to hurt India's interests in Afghanistan or Kashmir.

Obama knows that resolving Kashmir is a critical piece of the "Af-Pak" strategy; he even mooted a renewed push for negotiations during his campaign for president. But in office he has been faced with a massive Indian lobbying effort warning that his special envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, would be shunned by Delhi if his brief included Kashmir. It has worked; Holbrooke hasn't mentioned Kashmir. And the Pakistani army is convinced that America and India form an axis against it.

There is a hole at the heart of Af-Pak. It's called peace between Pakistan and India. And no amount of aid, "decided shifts" or apocalyptic warnings will fill it.

GRAHAM USHER

Graham Usher, a writer and journalist based in Islamabad, is the author of Dispatches From Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process *(Pluto).*

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Eric Alterman

Do 'Better' With Less

As print publications are squeezed by economic pressures to "do more with less," I'd like to propose a radical revision of that time-honored cliché: instead of "more," how about "better"?

Barely an hour goes by when I do not come across a violation of fundamental laws of common sense in the dozens of publications I read regularly. These violations occur even in the most privileged precincts of the press and eat away at its credibility. A revealing example occurred on May 5 in a front-page *New York Times* story on Obama's proposal to tax offshore havens. The piece quoted the president, naturally—and who else? Well, for twenty-one of its twenty-four paragraphs the single response came from one John Castellani, president of the Business Roundtable, a big-business trade association, who complained, "This plan will reduce the ability of U.S. companies to compete in foreign markets, which will not only reduce jobs, but will also cripple economic growth here in the United States. It couldn't come at a worse time." Now, how is it possible that standard journalistic operating procedure is to relay a quote from a person whose job description demands that he say the idea stinks? The spokesman for the wealthy, globalized corporate elite thinks it's not such a hot idea for them to pay taxes, and this is somehow news? (And I've not even addressed the fact that the piece quoted exactly no one in favor of the president's proposal but three sources critical of it.)

Another curious practice—albeit one that has become almost mandatory in our Oprahfied culture—is the journalistic use of the word "we" when the writer really means "me." This can be harmless, as in *USA Today*'s ubiquitous "We love peanut butter"–style headlines. But sometimes the intent is more worrisome, as when a particular author seeks to implicate the rest of us in his (or her) own ideological assumptions. *Newsweek*'s Jacob Weisberg provided a textbook example of this linguistic sleight-of-hand when, on May 1, he wrote a piece about what he deemed to be the nation's implicit approval of the Bush/Cheney torture policies. Weisberg insists that "by 2003, if you didn't understand that the United States was inflicting torture on those deemed enemy combatants, you weren't paying much attention." The only evidence he can cite, however, is a single December 2002 *Washington Post* story employing the phrase "stress and duress." Later in the piece, he points to spring 2004 stories on Abu Ghraib in *The New Yorker*—reports that were alternately attacked and denied by the Bush administration—and stories on waterboarding published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* shortly thereafter. Leaving aside that these came long after Weisberg's deadline for the country's "collective complicity" in the Bush administration's criminal behavior abroad, these citations would support his argument only if one also accepted that (a) the entire country takes to heart every story that appears in these publications, and (b) we all agreed and understood that waterboarding constituted "torture." In the real world, if you added up their circulations, subtracted for overlap and again for skimmers who do not read every word and again for disagreements on terminology and tactics, you could probably pack everyone who "knew" and approved into Yankee Stadium and still leave the fancy seats behind home plate entirely empty.

That Weisberg would wish to implicate so many people in this supersecret practice would be bizarre were his aims less transparent. In August 2004—long after he says "we" were well aware of "our" torture policies—Weisberg took to the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* to criticize "Bush-haters" like Graydon Carter, James Wolcott, Joe Conason, Sidney Blumenthal and yours truly on behalf of "shrewder commentators" like Bush war cheerleaders Thomas Friedman and Andrew Sullivan. The apparent intention of the attack—which included an implicit defense of Bush/Cheney as innocent of "intentional deception" and deserving of kudos for increasing AIDS funding and deposing the Taliban, among other achievements—was to set the parameters of "responsible" dissent in territory no further to the left than Weisberg, an Iraq War supporter, felt comfortable. For even though almost everybody "knew," Weisberg could not find room within his 2,224 words on Bush's presidency for a single mention of the practice of "waterboarding," much less the word "torture."

A final problem is the tolerance of big-name pundits who simply make up "facts" to suit their ideological predispositions. This happens far more frequently than is widely understood but usually comes to light only when a controversy erupts. George Will, for instance, enjoyed the honor of being raked over the coals by the news staff of his own newspaper, its weather blog, even its cartoonist, for what the *Post*'s Andrew Freedman called "a very troubling pattern of misrepresentation of climate science." And yet Will not only received no sanction from his newspaper, his dishonesty was defended by *Post* editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who, naturally, attacked Will's critics for trying to "silence" him. Sadly, President Obama himself was apparently tripped up by Sullivan's penchant for ideologically motivated fabrications. Somehow Sullivan's false assertion that Winston Churchill had refused to embrace torture during World War II made it into Obama's response to a question during his April 29 press conference. In fact, as Andrew Roberts, author of *Master and Commander*, pointed out on The Daily Beast, it's pretty much a certainty that German POWs were tortured to clear the path to D-Day. By making his case so carelessly, Sullivan—and by extension Obama—strengthened the hand of the torturers by tossing them an easy rhetorical victory.

Now it turns out that, in response to ref-working right-wingers complaining of an alleged "knee-jerk liberal" orientation of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the paper has hired John Yoo as a regular columnist. His speciality? Tortured arguments… ■

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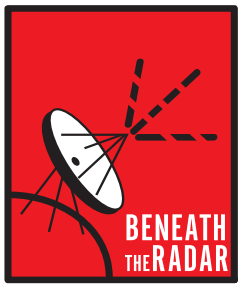
Gary Younge

London Falling

So this is how it ends. More than a decade after Labour came into power in Britain promising ethical leadership and public probity, it is set to leave with public regard for the party and Parliament at a record low. The party is in free fall, the political culture is in shards and the political class, in disgrace. For the first time in more than 300 years, the Speaker of the House has been ousted. Ministers and MPs on both sides of the aisle have resigned. Prime Minister Gordon Brown could be next. For Labour, things will only get worse. European elections on June 4 will leave the party depleted. A general election, which must be held within a year, could well devastate it for a generation.

The source of this particular crisis is a scandal over members of Parliament claiming expenses from the public purse. Their appetites have ranged from the venal to the vulgar and from the petty to the prolific. One minister's husband claimed for a pay-per-view soft-porn movie; another to have his moat cleaned, his piano tuned and the lights fixed at the stable at his country manor. Some charged for remodeling homes they then flipped, while others claimed for mortgages that they had already paid off. The Labour chief whip, who is supposed to enforce the rules, claimed the equivalent of $28,226 over four years for food, without submitting receipts. His Conservative counterpart claimed $4,704 for new windows at his second home. One Tory put in for manure for his garden; a Labour MP claimed $1.17 for a Scotch egg.



A recent poll in the *Times* of London reveals widespread disenchantment with the establishment. More than 80 percent believe the abuse shows "how self-serving and out of touch most are." Four in five said the MPs' defense that these claims were allowed holds little water. The idea that this scandal should be the thing that brings down this particular establishment beggars belief. A public that could stomach an illegal war on Iraq that cost millions of lives and billions of pounds is gagging at the legal exploitation of expenses that has cost the taxpayer a couple million pounds.

The popular wave of disgust over MPs' expenses is analogous to the outcry here over AIG bonus payments. Many of the most egregious examples—including the moat, the meals and the windows—were perfectly legal. But at a time of pay freezes and layoffs, legality took second place to propriety. Nothing essentially new has happened, but new circumstances have forced people to examine an established practice in a new way. And they do not like what they see.

Both main parties supported the war, not to mention the part-privatization of many public utilities, and there has been relatively little to choose from between them on policy matters beyond presentation. But so long as the economy was doing well and the main opposition wasn't offering anything better, people were prepared to give Labour the benefit of the doubt. The economic crisis, however, has shifted the focus of discussion and discontent. Income inequality is now at its widest since the 1960s; unemployment, at 7.1 percent, has seen its largest quarterly rises since 1981—the dog days of Thatcherism. Child poverty and pension poverty are up. Labour now looks set for a rout at the general election, which must be held on or before June 3 next year.

Many in the party have taken aim at Gordon Brown. His leadership through this economic meltdown has been patchy, and his handling of the political crisis has been pathetic. A cringe-worthy attempt to get in front of the expenses scandal with a YouTube video backfired for being inadequate in substance and inept in style. In the last budget, Brown pledged a substantial tax hike on the rich. But after twelve years of social authoritarianism, war and race-baiting, it was too little, too late. When Labour MPs aren't talking about claiming for flat-screen TVs and hanging plants, they are gossiping about mounting a leadership challenge before next year's elections.

But there are only so many deck chairs you can rearrange on a ship that has been going down for this long. Replacing Blair with Brown was supposed to reverse Labour's fortunes. It worked for a couple of months. A change of personnel can only achieve so much without a shift in policies and politics.

New Labour did score some major achievements, including vastly increasing investment in health and education, the minimum wage, civil unions for same-sex couples, devolution for Scotland and Wales and peace in Northern Ireland. But most of those were in the first term and have failed to compensate for the party's glaring failures.

In the absence of any confidence in the mainstream, a volatile and disillusioned electorate is poised to reward the margins. The European elections look set to deliver big wins for the nationalist United Kingdom Independence Party, the racist British National Party and the Greens.

Thanks to proportional representation and the toothless nature of the European Parliament, these upcoming elections provide the perfect opportunity for a protest vote. But the signs are as predictable as they are portentous.

A party with historical roots in the working class that fails to advance the interests of that class will engender cynicism. New Labour's electoral project was based in no small measure on the calculation that the poor had nowhere else to go. A small but determined minority have retreated into their national and racial laagers in search of solace rather than solutions.

Whether Labour gets rid of Brown after the European elections or voters do at the general election makes little difference. New Labour is finished. What replaces it will almost certainly be worse. And yet we should not mourn its passing. The longer it continued, the more toxic its legacy would be and the more complicit we would be in it. ■

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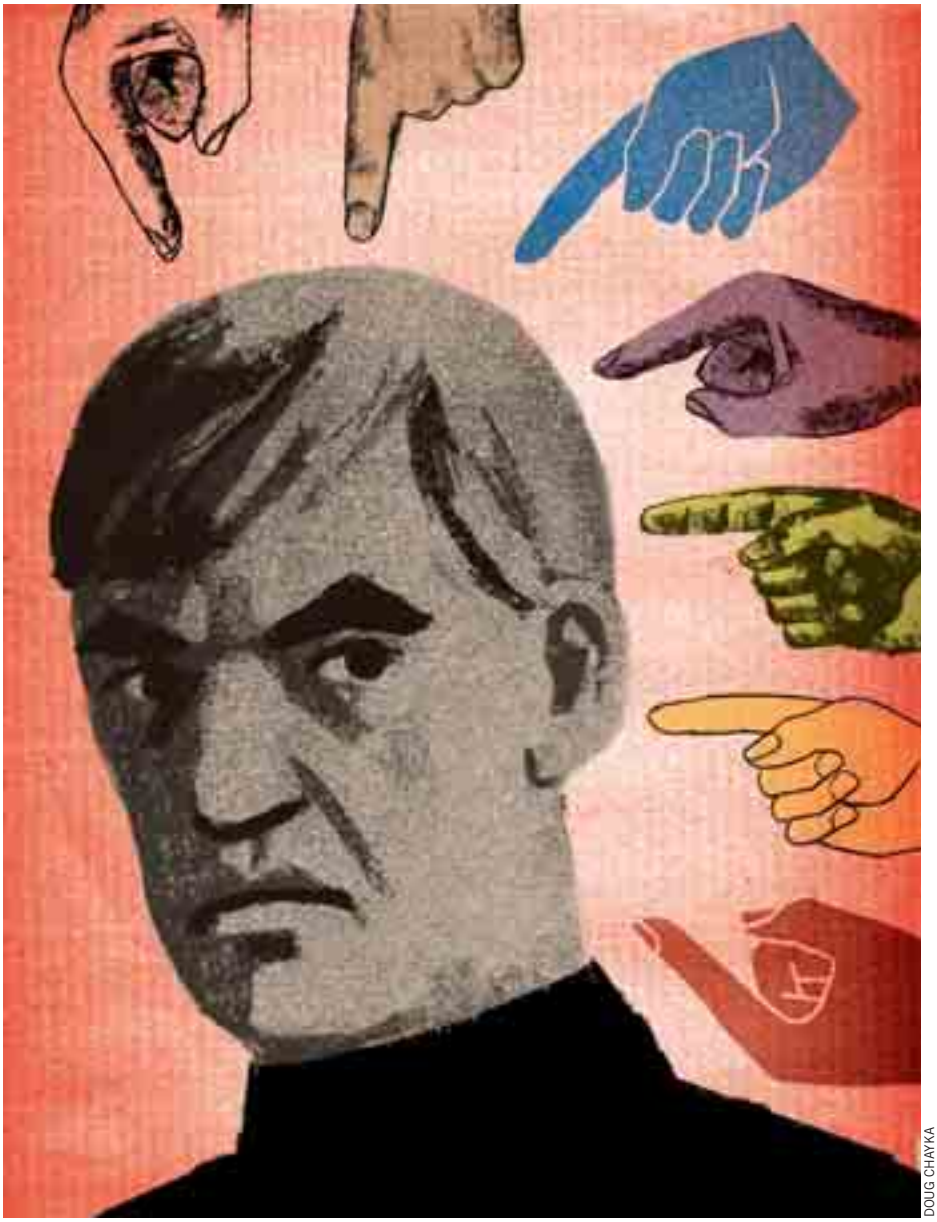
Books & the Arts.

The Kundera Conundrum

by JANA PRIKRYL



DOUG CHAYKA

Late last year, as France's six-month term in the European Union's rotating presidency drew to a close, Nicolas Sarkozy suggested that his time at the helm be extended, while French officials hinted that the member state in waiting, the Czech Republic, would bungle its turn. The whispers were ignored, and the smaller nation assumed power—only to be embarrassed by a diplomatic *crise*. The Czech government had commissioned an artwork to celebrate the transition and decorate the lobby of the European Council building in Brussels. On January 12, Czech artist David Cerný unveiled a monumental sculpture whose twenty-seven pieces represented the EU's member states: Bulgaria a network of squat toilets; France obscured by a banner announcing Grève! ("Strike!"); Germany a series of interlocking autobahns vaguely resembling a swastika; the United Kingdom conspicuous in its absence. Bulgaria demanded that its latrines be removed from the display, while Slovakia (a sausage wrapped in the Hungarian tricolor) contented itself with a formal apology. If anyone doubted Cerný's lack of fealty toward his patron, it was soon revealed that he had pocketed the £350,000 fee meant to be shared with the twenty-six other European artists he was supposed to have tapped for collaboration on the piece. In an interview with the BBC soon after the dust-up, Cerný said that returning the money "would be sort of difficult." By the following week he declared that he would repay the fee in full.

For Czechs who followed the Cerný flap, there was little novelty in its combination of brazen swindles and crude political provocations. In early 2008, an investigative reporter named Janek Kroupa helped Vlastimil Tlustý—then a member of the conservative ODS Party who was waging an internecine contest against Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek—to stage compromising photos of Tlustý enjoying a bath with a young woman. Apparently animated by professional curiosity, Kroupa established a fictive detective agency as a front for shopping around the images to other ODS members to see if anyone in Tlustý's orbit had an appetite for blackmail. Jan Morava, then a 29-year-old ODS member of Parliament from a district just north of Prague, took the bait, trying to sell the photos to *Mladá fronta Dnes*, a national newspaper (in a deal prearranged by Kroupa). And in a remarkable twist, Morava told the "detectives" that by way of paying for the photos, he had a fresh commission to offer: he wanted to be photographed on the sly with another young woman, the 23-year-old daughter of Olga Zubová, a Green Party member whose support of ODS legislation was considered inadequate. Morava intended to use these images to suggest that Zubová's daughter was being watched, thereby pressuring the legislator to bolster her support of ODS. The entire scheme was finally exposed in September, when Kroupa had enough evidence—much of it footage from hidden

Jana Prikryl is on the editorial staff of The New York Review of Books.

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cameras—to undermine Morava. Prime Minister Topolánek called for both politicians to resign and criticized the reporter's "provocative" approach to journalism. Morava broke into tears at the press conference in which he announced his departure. Tlustý rode it out and managed to remain in office. And despite the questions raised about his ethics, Kroupa seems only to have burnished his reputation with this manufactured exposé.

By mid-October, the Tlustý/Morava affair had been bumped from the front pages by a scandal with considerably more gravitas, though no less slavering by the media: a prominent weekly magazine claimed that in 1950, Milan Kundera had sent to prison a 22-year-old Czech who had been spying for the West. The furor this news aroused in the Czech Republic seems inseparable from the Czechs' persistent "allergy" to the expatriate novelist. Ivan Klíma diagnosed the ailment in a 1990 interview with Philip Roth, explaining that Czechs resent Kundera for being "an indulged and rewarded child of the Communist regime [before] 1968," too hands-off in his opposition to the party even after he began to criticize it in the '60s, and all the while presenting his travails under Communism to the world beyond the Iron Curtain in a "simplified and spectacular way." Now people were wondering how Kundera could have suppressed the 1950 incident for sixty years, even as he garnered international prestige for his opposition to Communism and his literary autopsies of the moral rot it breeds in the individual conscience. Perhaps he hadn't kept the episode under wraps. Could he have recycled it in his fiction? After all, his stories and novels are full of the betrayals endemic to a totalitarian regime. Speculating on whether Kundera had pulled off a grand deception, Czech journalists spiced their accounts of the affair with scenes from his novels in which characters seem to play according to the 1950 script.

Naturally, the article that broke the Kundera story—a weird collage of historical reconstruction and literary innuendo—became a story in its own right, and the outcry about Kundera became a meta-outcry: how could allegations touching a nerve so central to Czech history be slapped together for the delectation of a tabloid readership? Serious writers and historians were aghast, and many wrote pieces trying to show why, if Kundera had betrayed someone to the police, the political climate of the 1950s might mitigate his guilt. The story's relative longevity was sustained by Kundera's refusal to offer more than a summary denial, one that unfortunately tended to raise more questions than it answered. It's impossible to reach a final conclusion about the episode without a more forthcoming statement from him, because the degree of blame he might bear is so deeply tied to his motives at the time and how much he knew about the Western agent—when, and if, he may have given his name to the police. At the same time, the best intentions of journalists trying to give Kundera the benefit of the doubt by cleaving to the subjunctive in writing about the allegations have usually collapsed beyond the first wordy sentences: among the many Czech articles that I read on this subject, including those defending Kundera, only a handful stubbornly avoided the conclusiveness of the past tense. Ironically, as more writers joined the scrum of Kundera's defense, the more tightly his name became associated with the episode and the less credible his denial appeared.

However sensational its claims, the *Respekt* article was based on an authentic police report.

Skirmishes over the Czech Republic's Communist past have been part of its political life for almost two decades, and the media have proven adept at profiting from them. An unfortunate precedent was set shortly after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when widespread doubts about the new government's legitimacy led to the enactment of a controversial "lustration" law. A closed parliamentary commission was established to vet a wide range of public officials: former senior members of the Communist Party and agents of the *Státní bezpecnost* (secret police, or StB) were banned from public office and other administrative positions for five years. So, too, was anyone who had signed a document agreeing to collaborate with the StB. But people had signed the agreements for different reasons and then collaborated to very different degrees, and the new law disregarded all that. Former dissidents, who had been special targets of the StB, could now find themselves blacklisted because their name appeared on the wrong list. The irony was that in shrouding the deliberations in secrecy and diverting them from open judicial review, lustration may "have helped to inhibit discussion of the past in general," a 1999 assessment of the law in *Central Europe Review* concludes. "The last two decades of Communist rule remain almost entirely unexplored in [Czech] academic or popular history."

Yet the newly freed Czech press did not leave the past unexplored, after its manner. Since the early '90s, lists of people whose names appeared in still-classified StB archives were published by Petr Cibulka, a former member of Charter 77, leading to many painful reckonings. In 1999, when Cibulka published a second edition of the list in book form, it sold five times as many copies as the average work of fiction. (These days Cibulka posts the list online, making it easier to search for people by name and date of birth.) Two years ago in a government project called *Otevrená minulost* (Open Past), the StB archives were opened to the public for the first time since the Velvet Revolution, in part to respond to what one ODS member called "a growing pressing need to find a systematic solution to this problem, where we have new cases [of Communist collaboration] appearing every month." But organizing, declassifying and digitizing the vast trove of secret police archives only made it easier for enterprising reporters to dig through files looking for famous names that might make headlines: and dig they did, resulting in a fresh spate of revelations in the daily tabloids.

The weekly *Respekt* is generally considered a wide-ranging, right-of-center magazine that publishes political analysis and cultural reviews. Last fall it was *Respekt* that published the allegations against Kundera, in a piece titled "Milan Kundera's Denunciation." It reads like a detective story, with its authors, Adam Hradilek and Petr Trešnák, mustering 6,000 words of derring-do, drama and inevitability around a 250-word police report that Hradilek found in the archive of his employer, the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (USTR, in its Czech acronym), while doing some research for a relative. (He did not quite stumble upon the item: he had been told, before searching the files, that Kundera might be involved.) Given the brevity of the report and the absence of corroborating material evidence, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the *Respekt* article is the iron grip it maintains on a single interpretation of the pregnant source document. To reinforce its thesis, the article was packaged for maximum impact using all the modern tools of media suasion: an illustra-

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Edward B. Burger is Professor of Mathematics in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Williams College. He earned a B.A. with distinction in mathematics from Connecticut College (summa cum laude) and his Ph.D. in mathematics from The University of Texas at Austin. He is the recipient of numerous honors, including the prestigious Chauvenet Prize presented by the Mathematical Association of America and a variety of teaching awards.

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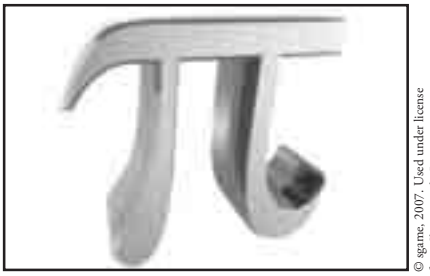

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Archimedes calculated pi, or the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, as 3.1418.

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tion of Kundera looking mischievous and intellectual filled the magazine's cover, and a teaser promised "the story of a man who in 1950 was put in prison for fourteen years by the famous writer." *Respekt* must have seeded the skies with notices, for on the Sunday before the story's publication on October 13 Kundera's alleged transgression was already being discussed on the evening news. No one involved comes away entirely clean from this episode—except the story's unfortunate, sidelined subject, Miroslav Dvorácek, the man Kundera had allegedly denounced, who moved to Sweden after serving fourteen years of a twenty-two-year sentence. He is now 81 and refuses to talk to the press.

Yet the article, however bold its promotion, was based on an archival document later separately verified as authentic. (A photograph of the original typed page was printed alongside the article in *Respekt*.) According to the report, on March 14, 1950, a 20-year-old student named Milan Kundera appeared at a Prague police station. Kundera, a student at the Kolonka dormitory, which served several local universities, reported that a visitor had left his suitcase in a fellow student's room. The visitor was a young man named Miroslav Dvorácek, and he had stowed his suitcase in the room of an old friend, a woman named Iva Militká, Kundera apparently said. She had mentioned this to her boyfriend, Miroslav Dlask. "Based on this declaration," the report continues, two officers went to the dorm, inspected the suitcase and questioned Militká. (The report, just a half page of text, clicks like a row of falling dominoes, the phrases "based on this" and "according to that" alternating to chart how one piece of information led to the next.) "According to Militká's declaration," Dvorácek had "allegedly" deserted the army and "might have been" living illegally in Germany for the past year. A look in official logbooks revealed that Dvorácek was indeed a wanted man. "Based on this discovery," two senior officers were stationed in Militká's room. Around 8 PM "the aforementioned Dvorácek actually entered the room" and was arrested. The surprise of all concerned, including the writer of the report, that so much tediously compiled data had ended up revealing a real live enemy of the people seems preserved in the amber of that adverb "actually." He actually showed! We actually got him!

In their article, Hradilek and Trešnák do not mention Militká's involvement in Dvorácek's arrest. Nor, until their final paragraphs, do they reveal a colossal conflict of interest: Militká is Hradilek's great-aunt, and though Hradilek says he has seen her only a few times in his life and "has no relationship with her," he initially looked into the episode as a favor to his cousin Matej Dlask, her grandson, who wanted to help his grandmother write her memoirs. When Matej asked Hradilek to investigate the story, he also mentioned "Kundera's possible role." Militká had eventually married Dlask, and according to the *Respekt* article, only in the '90s did Dlask admit to her that back in 1950 he had told Milan Kundera about Dvorácek's visit. (This too cannot be verified: Dlask died in the 1990s.) For Hradilek, perhaps this sequence of events supports his version of the story and discredits Kundera's denial; because the police report he found names Kundera, as Matej said it might, it seems to bear out Militká's claim about her husband's admission. But of course it also raises the question of whether Hradilek began combing through old police files for less than altruistic reasons.

Respekt obscured that Kundera appears to have been unaware he was exposing a fugitive.

Another thing the *Respekt* story obscures is that, based on the police document's careful attention to the timeline of the arrest—its punctilious record of the sources and sequence of new information—Kundera was reporting an anomaly and appears to have been unaware that he was exposing a fugitive. This crucial fact was also elided in newsy encapsulations abroad. The *Times* of London, in an otherwise accurate piece, translated the police report as follows, with ellipses: "Student Milan Kundera, born April 1, 1929 in Brno…reported to our department…Dvoracek, reportedly a deserter who had illegally fled to Germany." The statement following the second ellipsis pertains to facts supplied by Militká, yet this redaction implicates Kundera. Adding to the confusion, some of Kundera's defenders unwittingly misconstrued his role in the incident. Ivan Klíma wrote a thoughtful commentary for *Lidové noviny*, a Czech paper, exploring the episode's ambiguities and maintaining that Kundera was entitled to the presumption of innocence. Yet Klíma proceeded on the assumption that, if the allegations were true, Kundera had known he was reporting a Western agent. "To know of someone who arrived in the country illegally, and to hide him, meant abetting treason," Klíma wrote. Trying to offer a plea of self-defense on behalf of Kundera, he instead set up a false hypothesis that deepened his friend's guilt.

As misunderstandings and speculations piled up, Hradilek himself came under scrutiny. He is a 32-year-old researcher at the USTR, with a general arts degree from Charles University and some three years' experience collecting oral histories. The Czech government established the USTR as a research body early last year to study human rights abuses that occurred in Czechoslovakia between 1938 and 1989, under both Nazis and Communists, which in its bureaucratspeak the institute calls "the time of nonfreedom." Last spring it hired Hradilek to interview Czechs about life before 1989 and to help organize the archive that was to contain these accounts. The question was, Why had Hradilek published the incendiary Kundera claims in the splashiest manner possible, while at the same time touting, in his *Respekt* byline, his affiliation with the apparently impartial USTR? The institute had added to the impression that the article was a coproduction between itself and the magazine by posting the original police report on the institute website just as the story hit newsstands (Hradilek had shown the piece to a USTR press officer five days before publication, and the institute decided to preempt a media onslaught by putting the police report online). The USTR publishes the monthly journal *Pamet' a Dejiny* (Memory and History), so historians were astonished that the story had not been vetted by the institute and published under its own auspices.

Not long ago I spent an hour on the phone with Hradilek. He seemed like a smart, congenial guy, just returned from a three-month Fulbright at Columbia University, where he'd managed to sit out the worst of the media hurricane. If there was opportunism in his pursuit of the story's publication—and he told me he considered it "my personal finding"—it seemed balanced by his belief that the Czech Republic needs to confront the hard facts of what happened under Communism, one fragment of the ugly mosaic being the police report he'd found, whose sixty-year-old ink indelibly named Kundera. Yet as we spoke I sensed that the sheer gravity surrounding that famous name pulled a lot of control and discretion out of Hradilek's hands, and the story, bigger than his own experience and

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reputation in the world, simply got away from him. Speaking with a Czech journalist in October, he acknowledged that the article's headline was "very harsh" and mentioned that he planned to publish a more complete version of his research into the Dvorácek episode in an academic journal.

Hradilek said that he'd declined at the outset to write such a piece for *Pamet' a Dejiny* because he had researched the Kundera story in his spare time and found the police report in a USTR archive that is open to the public. He was under pressure to publish sooner rather than later because a number of other journalists had sniffed out the story and were prepared to scoop him. How had the story leaked? He said it was known to many of his relatives, thus word of the police report had eventually reached the ears of "maybe around fifty people," plus about "ten journalists." And last summer, while helping Petr Trešnák, who was an editor at *Respekt*, assemble documents for another article, Hradilek told him about the police report. It was no surprise to Trešnák: apparently he'd already heard about it, and Trešnák said that *Respekt* would be interested in publishing a co-written piece, for which he would supply additional facts about Kundera's life and fiction. The editors wanted to run the piece in October, in a back-to-school issue that would have a wider circulation among universities. This seemed like an excellent idea to Hradilek. At the same time, Hradilek told me that what disappointed him most was the "hysteria" the story provoked in the Czech Republic. He speculates that Kundera's own reaction was colored by reports in France (where the novelist has lived since 1975) that misread the *Respekt* article and suggested that Kundera had collaborated with the secret police, which, Hradilek said, "simply isn't true."

He also told me that his first draft of the *Respekt* piece focused solely on Dvorácek's story. The magazine and Trešnák then revised it so that Dvorácek's desperate tale was braided together with the rise of young Milan Kundera, with the intersection of their lives finding echoes in Kundera's fiction. "Milan Kundera's Denunciation" features several cutaways to episodes in the writer's *oeuvre*, and in each case the word "inspiration" makes a suggestive appearance, implying that not only did Kundera perpetrate the deed in question but that perhaps he is also a literary fraud, refusing to acknowledge that scenes in his novels are modeled on and indebted to a youthful trespass. Hradilek scoffed at the notion that *Pamet' a Dejiny* would have published such a controversial story in its own pages: "No one here at the USTR would be trying to dig up something on Kundera, because then it would be really like an inquisition institute." What did seem to irk him was the notion that Kundera might have a principled reason for keeping quiet about his Communist background: "opportunistic" was the word Hradilek used to describe the novelist's activities in his youth, when he "entered the Communist Party around 1948, then was expelled and then asked again for admission in 1953, and was accepted in 1956. This is crazy; this is like entering the NSDAP [the National Socialist Party] in 1944!"

Hradilek would not comment on one of the most salient charges against "Milan Kundera's Denunciation": that it had weakened the credibility of the USTR, and that, as one columnist put it, the "crypto-communists" in Parliament who'd been itching to shut down the institute had finally been given a pretext to do so. By November, Pavel Žácek, the institute's director, had distanced himself from the *Respekt* story, stating publicly that he hadn't read the article before it was printed and that USTR historians who indiscriminately publicized sensitive material on boldface names "would have to go" from the institute. Recent events tell a different story. Back home from his Fulbright, Hradilek has returned to the institute while at least three leading historians have resigned, citing its politicization. As for Žácek, his superiors in the institute's governing council (a group of seven, made up of historians and former dissidents elected by the Czech senate) threatened him with dismissal, and announced in December that a competition would be held for his position in early 2009, a process in which he'd be allowed to participate. A few weeks later, in January, the council reversed course and announced that Žácek's contract had been extended for another year.

Hradilek says that Kundera's Communist activities in his youth were 'opportunistic.'

When Kundera spoke by phone to the Czech Press Agency the day the *Respekt* story was published, he grew agitated and, his voice rising, uttered a denial based on a factual assertion that was neither germane nor in dispute: "I never saw that person! I didn't know that person at all.... How could I report someone I didn't know?" (The remarks Kundera made that day were disseminated on the radio, on the web and in print, and they remain his only public comments on the subject, aside from a later threat to sue *Respekt* and a subsequent retraction of the threat.) Kundera called the piece an "assassination of an author"; "the only mystery is how my name got there [in the report], and I don't know how to explain that." He mentioned repeatedly to the Czech Press Agency that he had been denied a chance to comment before the article was published, and now, with the story circling the world, there wasn't "even an inch of room left for my voice. Not an inch, but a wide expanse should have been left open, since the allegation is so serious. I am simply infuriated." He also suggested that the piece was published on October 13 to coincide with the first day of the Frankfurt Book Fair. The Czech writer Pavel Kohout, who was also a Communist in the '50s but has spoken openly about that chapter of his life, said in an interview with an online bookstore that Kundera's perturbation seemed to him "un-Kunderaesque," lacking the novelist's usual skepticism and detachment. Kohout said he would have been less surprised if Kundera had responded, in effect, "I don't see what all the fuss is about." If nobody ever saw reason to condemn Kundera for the Communist enthusiasm and propagandist poetry of his youth, why now condemn an action that is entirely consistent with that enthusiasm, making a routine police report about a random visitor, which any good comrade could have been expected to provide?

But, of course, in his writing Kundera holds the conscience to a higher standard, and that is one reason why this episode has been so hard to digest. In the novel *Life Is Elsewhere*, completed in 1969 and published in France in 1973, he diagnoses the adolescent insecurities and ambitions that lead his main character, the budding poet Jaromil, to join the Communist Party: at Jaromil's first party meeting, "he stopped being nervous and shy.... He had found people among whom he no longer existed as a mother's son or a student in a class, but as his own self." At the end of the book, Jaromil attains a socialist triumph of sorts when he marches over to the police station to denounce his girlfriend's brother, who opposes the regime and intends to defect: at the station, about to give his statement, "for the first time he felt he was truly facing his [interlocutor] as one

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tough-minded adult faces another; equal to equal; man to man." Kundera lingers in excruciating detail on Jaromil's self-satisfaction after he has performed this service to his country: he skips out of the station, and "he didn't feel like being alone. It seemed to him that during the past hour his features had hardened, his step become firmer, and his voice more decisive. And he longed to be seen in his new incarnation." Rereading such passages (this story maps closest to the allegations against Kundera), one is perfectly aware that no biographical facts need underlie them; but one also feels that Kundera's denial—he told the Czech Press Agency, "If a person were going to do something like this, they'd have to have a motive; I have no memory of that woman [Militká]"—conceals the inner complexity that his novels often bitterly bring to light.

For very different reasons, Kundera's defenders and critics were eager to put the episode in its historical context. Two days after the story broke, a literary historian named Zdenek Pešat released a statement claiming that, in 1950, Miroslav Dlask, the boyfriend of Militká's mentioned in the police report, had told him that he had gone to the police with Dvorácek's name. Apparently, Kundera's role in the episode never came up between them. As for Dlask, he was protecting himself: Pešat was then a third-year student in the university's philosophy department and a member of the department's Communist committee, to whom Dlask turned because he felt he should inform both the police and the party of Dvorácek's presence in the dorm. Pešat said that at the time he never divulged Dlask's role in Dvorácek's arrest but now felt it was his duty to come forward, given the accusations being made about Kundera. Pešat then gave an interview saying that Kundera called him the day after he'd spoken up, and they were otherwise strangers. Another troop of columnists pointed out that Pešat's account did nothing to exonerate Kundera: couldn't both men have gone to the police? It was a question that couldn't be pursued, because Pešat's statement mentioned that he was seriously ill, bedridden and not able to respond to the media.

Other writers and historians pointed out that Kundera was the student head of his dormitory, and as such responsible for order there; once Dlask told him about Dvorácek's presence, Kundera would have felt under pressure to report the incident—lest Dlask (or anybody else who noticed the overnight guest in Militká's room) go to the police himself and report both Dvorácek's arrival and Kundera's shirking of his duty. A historian told the daily *Právo* that people often reported one another because they didn't know if a suspicious person had been planted by the secret police to test their loyalty to the party. Failure to make such a report could earn you six to ten years in prison. But did every Czech report on every other? How much duress would Kundera have been under? Questions of loyalty and conscience became so perplexing that some Czechs commenting on the episode made perfectly contradictory statements. The writer Milan Uhde defended Kundera and said that in his place, as head of a dormitory, he also would have gone to the police. But when asked more directly if he himself would ever have reported anyone, Uhde said:

> Oh, not by 1952. When I sat at the radio in 1950 with my father and heard reports from the political trials, where the son of one condemned man said that he was denouncing his father, my dad was sitting beside me and made the single political statement he ever uttered in my presence: "I thought he'd offer to put the noose around his father's neck." And I gathered from this one venomous sentence, which undercut the whole trial, that it was a monstrosity. From that moment on, to go to the police—even if only to say I'd seen two boys stealing a motorcycle—no! From then on I wouldn't dare tell the Czechoslovak police even about the most ordinary, despicable, objectively condemnable act!

Kundera's critics—or, more precisely, those who seemed disgusted by the prominent defenders he'd attracted—also looked back to the political atmosphere of the 1950s but saw it more as an omen of where the country is heading today. In an op-ed in *Lidové noviny* at the end of October, the literary critic and former dissident Bohumil Doležal wrote that the whole affair wasn't a question of the conduct of one writer; it was about "freedom of expression and the freedom to refer back to problematic chapters of the past." He compared the statement that Václav Havel had made in support of Kundera—if the allegation was true, Havel said, we must "try to view it through the prism of its own time"—with the logic of Czech nationalists "defending the barbarities committed against Germans in the spring and summer of 1945," when 3 million German civilians were forcibly expelled from Czechoslovakia and several hundred thousand died during the exodus. Doležal seemed to think that anyone who criticized *Respekt* was advocating a two-tier system of justice in which ordinary citizens would be subject to archivally aided inquiries and celebrities spared such scrutiny. He feared that the upswell of support for Kundera cast doubt on Czech democracy, which is "based on faith in the public, in its ability to judge what is true and what is a lie, and on the faith that the public is grown up and doesn't need curators."

But this line of argument was disingenuous, since the majority of *Respekt*'s critics weren't saying celebrities were off-limits; they were simply advocating for consistent standards in bringing archival discoveries about the Communist era to light. After all, it wasn't just the breathless tone of "Milan Kundera's Denunciation" that upset people; its sly methods were equally disturbing. In the article, Hradilek mentions that he had earlier sent a fax to Kundera, giving him a chance to comment on the matter, but that the novelist had chosen to maintain his silence. When the fax was posted on *Respekt*'s website two days after the story broke, it was shown to contain no word about the police report and no reference to the imminent *Respekt* article or the USTR, only a request from the oral historian Adam Hradilek to talk about Kundera's role in an episode Hradilek was researching, involving a young man who'd been arrested in 1950 from Kundera's college dorm. Because Kundera stopped giving interviews nearly twenty-five years ago (they "can only lead to the disappearance of the writer," he wrote in *The Art of the Novel*, and, he added, all his reported remarks after 1985 "are to be considered forgeries"), it seems possible that he or his wife could have discarded the fax as just another quixotic missive from media-land. In an interview, Petr Trešnák, Hradilek's co-author, fumed over Kundera's inaccessibility and truculence: "How can a person who has done everything possible over the past twenty-five years to prevent people from contacting him now complain that we didn't approach him?" Kundera, in other words, had this coming.

Whatever one concludes about Kundera's guilt, it is possible to imagine that the allegation was less dismaying to the writer than the form it took and the attention it drew. Having one's past splashed across front pages and reduced to a sound bite seems like the nightmare fulfillment of the issues Kundera has been exploring in his nonfiction for the

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past twenty years—a point easily missed amid the more facile claims that the central themes of his fiction were somehow "inspired" by the Dvorácek incident. An elegiac current runs through his latest book in English, *The Curtain*, which is also his third treatise on the novel. Like *The Art of the Novel* (1986) and *Testaments Betrayed* (1993), *The Curtain* is a digressive, erudite, somewhat exasperating meditation on the moral virtue of the form—and Kundera is anxious, almost hopeless, about its future. His philosophy has altered little over the course of these books: he seems to be mining the same ground more and more deeply rather than exploring fresh terrain. Besides ruminating on the history of classical music and that of the novel, he is preoccupied with the conflicting aims of art and journalism, and by the struggle of writers—Salman Rushdie and E.M. Cioran, for instance—to assert the primacy of their work over their actions and over widespread misinterpretations of both.

Kundera's antipathy toward the media can be as curdled as the Czechs' allergy to his success.

Kundera has little patience for public utterances not lodged in the polyvocal framework of a novel, in which every character's perspective jostles against every other character's perspective. In *Testaments Betrayed*, he notes that this narrative structure, invented by Rabelais and Cervantes, cultivated a new genus of morality, "the morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding." Kundera's dismay at what he sees as the novel's eclipse in Western culture—snuffed out by a pestilence of "novelized confessions, novelized journalism, novelized score-settling, novelized autobiographies, novelized indiscretions, novelized denunciations"—is clearly directed at both sides of the old Iron Curtain, at anyone presumptuous enough to request his private opinion or to write about his deeds rather than quote his published works. In *The Curtain* he deplores not only the "*small-context terrorism*" that nations like the Czech Republic have imposed on their artists, "reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland," but also the direction French culture is taking, prizing the "social resonance" of certain inferior works regardless of their limited aesthetic worth, which "demonstrates that indifference to aesthetic value inevitably shifts the whole culture back into provincialism."

This spring, to coincide with his eightieth birthday on April 1, Kundera's fourth book of nonfiction was published in France. *Une rencontre* (An Encounter) revisits his most cherished themes, and through brief meditations on a crowded gallery of writers, including Anatole France, Josef Skvorecky and Curzio Malaparte, he argues again for the fundamental autonomy of the novelist. Of course, nowhere in the book does he address the allegations of last fall. But at one point, recalling an argument he had with a journalist in the early '60s about the novelist Bohumil Hrabal, Kundera hazards a statement that one imagines he wouldn't mind having applied to himself today. Defending Hrabal's refusal to take a political stand in Communist Czechoslovakia, Kundera chided the journalist, who expected more from Hrabal: "A single book by Hrabal renders a greater service to people, to their inner freedom, than all of us with our gestures and proclamations of protest!" What a delicate scale—aesthetic works weighed against good works—for Kundera to be tipping at this point, but he seems helplessly drawn to it.

Perhaps that's because his disillusionment with "politics"—all that is not the novel—goes so deep. The novel alone preserves the essential ambiguity of existence, but in *The Curtain* he is also extremely doubtful about the veracity of witnesses, documents, archives: they mislead, they are misinterpreted, they obscure reality behind a curtain of received ideas. Personal memory is vulnerable in this regard too, and even his own recollection of, say, the Prague Spring, were Kundera to try to write about it autobiographically, would be "paltry, certainly full of errors, of unwitting lies." One should not be "astonished or incensed" that people mangle the past in remembering it: "What becomes of our certainties about the past, and what becomes of History itself, to which we refer every day in good faith, naively, spontaneously? Beyond the slender margin of the incontestable (there is no doubt that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo), stretches an infinite realm: the realm of the approximate, the invented, the deformed, the simplistic, the exaggerated, the misconstrued, an infinite realm of nontruths that copulate, multiply like rats, and become immortal."

Kundera's great insight, however, into the instability of the past and the present is half lame on arrival. The great fertility of "nontruths" surely does not compromise *every* word not anchored in a piece of art. That the media tend to warp accounts of the past is surely a further incentive to correct those accounts whenever possible. But now, when what evidence there is suggests that Kundera knows more than he has said about the Dvorácek episode, he is, as ever, not talking. As specious as it is to place the civic health of the Czech Republic on Kundera's shoulders, it's also undeniable that he owes the truth, as best as he remembers it, to Miroslav Dvorácek and Iva Militká. Sometimes his antipathy toward the media seems as curdled as the Czechs' allergy to his success.

Indeed, Kundera should not be "astonished or incensed" that a young man in his former homeland sought his name in an archive and was moved to write about it in a magazine that was sure to sensationalize the story. The impulse to get the scoop is a natural one—and certainly familiar to us in the "West"—but in the Czech Republic the ambition comes spiked with a moral fervor to right the wrongs of forty blighted years. In late October the writer and editor Karel Hvížd'ala—who spent the '80s in exile in West Germany and returned to Prague after the Velvet Revolution, helping to establish several of the newspapers that now constitute the country's print media—commented on the three-way media pileup of Kundera and the members of Parliament Tlustý and Morava, and implied that the independence of the Czech press is still something of an illusion. In Western Europe, he argued, journalism is idealized as a disinterested quest to report the story, whatever that may be, but in the Czech Republic, by contrast, "journalism always served some other cause: at first, nationhood, then the building of the Czechoslovak state, then socialism, and finally capitalism. This is hard for those in Western Europe to understand."

Five weeks after "Milan Kundera's Denunciation" appeared, Martin M. Šimecek, editor in chief of *Respekt*, inadvertently made Hvížd'ala's point for him. Šimecek published an essay in *Respekt* defending Hradilek's original article and suggesting that Czechs had air-brushed their memories of the Communist era. They had failed, he said, to confront the "banality of evil" that permeated Czech life from

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1948 to 1989. Apparently, Hradilek and Trešnák's speculations about Kundera, based on a sixty-year-old police report and interviews with a few survivors, but not Kundera, were part of a newly candid discourse that would correct the prettified, novelized illusions Czechs harbored about Communism. New standards were evidently needed to determine each person's responsibility for the darkness of those years: "Could a young Communist in the early '50s," Šimecek asked, "pass through that regime and, by his mere existence, which included perhaps only the raising of his hand at party meetings, avoid encroaching on the fates of other people?"

This is a remarkable, if rhetorical, question, suggesting a perspective on the past even more radical than Hradilek and Trešnák's finger-pointing: your membership in a group made you responsible for its worst crimes. It's the same iron logic that was enforced by the Communists throughout their forty years in power. It also claims amnesia to the public cleansings—like the lustration law and Cibulka's lists—that have sought, for better or worse, to weed former Communists out of positions of authority. Of course, every Czech who lived through the Communist regime must make his or her own reckoning. And Kundera seems mistaken, at best, in the fervor with which he cloaks his silence in the mantle of art. He may be damaging his legacy more by refusing to discuss that chapter of his and Dvorácek's lives—assuming he has anything to add—than he would by talking about it. But given the malignant tone of the debate, it's unsurprising that he has withdrawn, as one of his friends told a Czech newspaper, to write his last novel.

Perhaps the crowning irony of the atonement that Kundera's critics demanded of him last year is how often they seemed to be acting out scenes from his novels. Šimecek unwittingly echoed a passage from one of the novelist's "airbrushed" works, with the crucial difference being that in Kundera's telling the overwhelming question is turned inward: "I have never voted for anyone's downfall, but I am perfectly aware that this is of questionable merit, since I was deprived of the right to raise my hand." Thus Ludvik, the main character of Kundera's first novel, *The Joke*, weighs his own guilt: "It's true that I've long tried to convince myself that if I had been in their position I wouldn't have acted as they did, but I'm honest enough to laugh at myself: why would I have been the only one not to raise his hand? Am I the one just man?" ■

Cultural Critique

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Puttin' on the Glitz

by NATASHA WIMMER

Though not advertised as such in the United States, José Manuel Prieto's *Rex* is actually the third volume in a trilogy that begins with the as-yet-untranslated *Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia* (Encyclopedia of a Life in Russia) and also includes the acclaimed *Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire* (Prieto's first novel published in English, in 2000). Prieto, who was born in Cuba in 1962 and spent twelve years in Russia, where he studied engineering, is a writer who ascribes great seriousness to ideas, as befits someone who grew up in a system steeped in ideology. Among many other things, the trilogy undertakes to explain the aesthetic underpinnings of the collapse of Communism, while gathering itself for a complicated indictment of contemporary fiction, a tortured denouncement that implicates Prieto himself.

Prieto portrays the adventures of J., who appears in slightly different guises in each of the three novels. J. first shows up as a St. Petersburg dandy in *Enciclopedia*, bent on initiating a Russian ingénue into the pleasures of materialism; in *Nocturnal Butterflies* he returns as a post-Soviet smuggler hunting for a rare butterfly on the shores of the Black Sea; and finally, in *Rex* he adopts the role of tutor to the son of nouveau riche Russians. His progression isn't exactly linear, but it could be said that he moves from the pursuit of luxury as a saving grace to a more troubled vision of life's (and art's) decorative elements. In Prieto, frivolity is a serious matter, and in that sense he mines the same territory as Nabokov (an oft-cited influence) and even J.K. Huysmans, best known for the 1884 novel *À Rebours*, who prized a supersaturated mode of sensual overload and voluptuous connoisseurship.

Rex, fittingly, is set in the glossiest of sanctuaries: a Marbella mansion furnished in spectacularly bad taste ("the unbearable sheen of the unbearable furniture, the fake swords and suits of armor"), like something out of a *Hello!* magazine spread. To this Mecca comes J., to apply for the job of tutor to the son of wealthy Russian expatriates. His new employer is a man named Vasily, a clod in Versace suits who owes his fortune to the discovery of a new technique for the production of ersatz diamonds in a dazzling array of colors. Vasily has good taste in women, if in nothing else, and J. is fascinated by the boss's lovely wife, Nelly, whose beauty is set off by her intelligence and an obscenely spectacular diamond necklace: "the nucleus of a star expanding outward in a sphere.…birds and bands of angels.… Her throat.… The stones around her throat."

Back in the Siberian forest, Vasily made a mistake: he pawned off some phony diamonds on a pair of Russian mobsters. Now he loiters nervously poolside, waiting for them to take their revenge. Meanwhile, his son Petya is instructed by J., with Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* as their sole textbook. J. consults Proust like an oracle, convinced that every possible situation can be explained by a passage from "the Book," as he calls it. Soon he progresses from lecturing young Petya to advising the increasingly desperate Vasily, until even Proust is tinged with the glitz of the Marbella household ("Only the Writer's enameled prose, his Versace prose") and is commandeered in an impossible effort to save Vasily.

BETTINA STRAUSS

José Manuel Prieto

Rex
By José Manuel Prieto.
Translated by Esther Allen.
Grove. 321 pp. $24.

Prieto's ingenious, if not maddening, storytelling method is to take Proustian rambles ahead of the action, analyzing events before they're revealed to the reader. One of the early turning points of the plot comes when J. discovers that his employers are not as wealthy as he imagined. The manner in which he learns this is gallingly petty (Vasily has to borrow money from him to tip the doorman at a disco), but the highflown meditations that anticipate the discovery include a startling comparison of a scene from *The Matrix* and a (possibly trumped-up) scene from Proust, as well as increpations against Vasily ("a defenseless scoundrel, a petty thief, a small-time crook") and angry ravings ("they hadn't paid me! At all! Ersatz diamonds? They hadn't paid me!").

As this language and range of reference suggests, Prieto applies nineteenth-century stylings, including direct address of the reader (or of the grown-up Petya, the purported recipient of his former tutor's confidences), to highly contemporary scenes. This leads to some gorgeous passages in which Prieto describes ordinary objects as if they're part of an alien landscape, simultaneously futuristic and archaic (shades of Nabokov's *Ada*). A cellphone trills and lights up with a green light, "like a goldfinch with a mottled throat"; bathroom faucets are "plump as birds with puffed-out plumage"; a pool is like "the submerged flank of an enormous blue fish." Metaphor is used to create a veritable menagerie of commodities, with conspicuous objects fleshed out as gaudy beasts. Under Prieto's X-ray gaze, even humans register as high-tech goods. The breasts of Vasily's mistress, Larissa, are "rosy in the afternoon light, soft and round. The veins or blood vessels beneath her skin like those new telephones made of translucent plastic, designed to show the electronics running through them." And banal palaces of consumption, like the mall, become exotic, fragile constructions. Following Vasily past the shops, J. has a vision of him as "a Minotaur…unacquainted with the brittle nature of glass," breaking through the walls and "carrying everything off with him: wireless phones, juicers, garlands of colored lights for the garden."

If all of this is reminiscent of a fashion ad, the effect may not be accidental. *Rex* is well stocked with high-end brand names. As mentioned, there's Versace, of which J. disapproves: Vasily "should have paid only half

Natasha Wimmer is the translator of Roberto Bolaño's The Savage Detectives *and* 2666.

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the money he'd shelled out…to a tailor who could have cut him a good Savile Row suit with no gold-toned buttons, no fake monogram on the chest." And there's Lagerfeld, summoned when Nelly morphs unexpectedly into a bird, her "thighs covered with feathers like the thighs of a Lagerfeld model." In *Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia*, J. baptizes his ingénue with the name Linda, after supermodel Linda Evangelista. He also muses that *Enciclopedia* should ideally take the form of a fashion magazine. "I'd insert strips perfumed with OPIUM, with Anaïs Anaïs…I'd like it to be sold at the newsstands of big train stations, its resemblance to *Vogue* confusing the bored traveler."

Enciclopedia is a fascinating book, in some ways the key to the more remote fictional universes of *Nocturnal Butterflies* and *Rex*. It's far from straightforward—it's composed, as might be expected, in the form of an encyclopedia, and is conceived as a series of notes in which J. comments on the process by which he goes about writing another novel—but in it J. speaks plainly about some of the matters only indirectly addressed in the other two volumes of the trilogy, particularly the end of Communism, which Prieto dubs the "Fall of the Empire." J., it is revealed, was once a fervent young socialist, someone who upon first listening to Mozart was "unpleasantly surprised and disgusted by its irresponsible lightness." Then came his gradual awakening. "I learned to live without the security, the hope, the center of the Universe that was the Doctrine…the knowledge that I had staked everything on a fake emperor." Communism, he decides, was "a papier-mâché Utopia," full of the poorest imitations of Western products and institutions.

So J. begins to find delight in material things, in craftsmanship, in the artifacts of culture. Swiss chocolates, Dutch cheeses and minty fluoride toothpaste ("Frivolity attacked the carbon chains of the EMPIRE with the devastating force of FLUORIDE") are now licit indulgences, as is Mozart and, by extension, writers like Proust and Nabokov. The more ornamental and beautifully crafted, the more inimical to the shoddy utilitarianism of Soviet Russia (or Cuba). With the fervor of a convert, J. sets out to bring a young flute player, Anastasia (*a k a* Linda), into the materialist fold. He seduces her with the strange promise to hire her as the protagonist of the novel he is writing—she will act the part and J. will transfer the scenes to paper—and regales her with fashionable clothes and expensive dinners. By learning to accept frivolous things, she will confirm J.'s cautious new hedonism.

In *Enciclopedia* there's also an interesting section on what it means to J. to be Cuban. In all three novels, the protagonist's Cubanness is treated as something incidental, only evident in the odd detail. And yet, the very offhandedness of the references and their unexpectedness in the context (Russian and European) marks the trilogy. In *Enciclopedia*, only halfway through the book does the reader learn where J. is from: "I was, surprisingly, Cuban." Prieto's Cubanness, too, can also seem almost accidental, his language revealing little if anything of the country where he was born. This was a conscious choice, as he explains in an interview: "There's a mistaken idea according to which the author is classified by the language in which his book is written. If you read one of my books you don't know where the author's from, because it's written in a neutral language, a Spanish without regionalisms. It's a choice, neither a bad thing nor a good thing."

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This choice has implications for the fate of Prieto's novels in translation. They're far from easy books to translate, but their language is eminently renderable. Prieto's arcanities are personal, not local or national, and the puzzlelike quality of his storytelling and prose makes him a rewarding challenge for the translator. Esther Allen not only masters Prieto's circling, subject-and-verb-swallowing sentences but also comes up with inspired minutiae like "toothlet locking into toothlet" and "blued armor." She understands his fetish for detail, evident in all the meticulously translated instants of extreme close-up (a cellphone call: "little blue screen to pink earlobe") and the descriptions of massively magnified eyes, as if viewed through a jeweler's loupe.

And, of course, Allen also has to grapple with all the quotes, because *Rex* is defined by its use of quotation. Proust is the most frequently featured author, but the novel is so woven with references and citations—some explicit, most not—that it's often hard (for this reader, at least) to tell when Prieto gives way to Isak Dinesen or H.G. Wells or Borges (or one of at least fifty other writers cited in the Author's Note). Not all of the allusions are highbrow. Besides the reference to *The Matrix*, there are neat nods to Nintendo and *Star Wars*, all spliced smoothly into the story. There's no doubting Prieto's erudition, high or low, though he does seem to slyly allude (in a reference to Swift, no less) to an undignified source of quote-mining: "Assisted by a cloud of instantaneous beings or winged homunculi, the yahoos…. bring back, in their beaks, fragments and passages of all books…. All the wisdom of the Book, of all books, before my eyes, infinitely wise, fabulously rich."

Looming large in J.'s psyche are two abstract figures, the Writer and the Commentator. At first, the reader assumes that the Writer is Proust (the omnipresent Book is a kind of one-volume version of *Remembrance of Things Past*), but it gradually becomes clear that the Writer is a composite figure, a compendium of literary giants. This Writer, a godlike figure, represents all that is great and true in fiction. His corrupt counterpart in *Rex*—an incomparably lesser figure, J.'s bête noire—is the Commentator. Readers who don't pick up on the fact that the Writer is a multivalent being are provided with an explanation in the Author's Note, but no such explanation is supplied for the Commentator. Who is he? In general terms he is the ultimate yahoo, the representative of a parasitic vein of modern literature that feeds on the great Writers of the past. He might be a writer himself, or a critic (or a reviewer of this book!). More specifically, he might be Borges (though elsewhere Prieto seems to class Borges as a Writer). Most specifically, he is almost certainly J., and also Prieto himself.

The novel, after all, is divided into sections labeled "Commentaries," and Prieto, with his endless quoting, is the most ostentatious parasite imaginable, chewing up and digesting countless literary tidbits. More subtly, the novel is written in the form of commentary on a plot that seems almost beside the point. And the plot revolves around imitations (the fake diamonds). The more loudly J. attacks the Commentator, the more eagerly Prieto seems to incriminate himself. And J.'s attacks on the Commentator and his proxies are scathing. Early on, he watches a group of musicians play cover songs at a disco in Marbella and judges them "hardened and old as commentators…. Having lost, generationally, their skill, their faith in new songs." They're too "*cool*" to bring any passion or newness to their singing. Later on, he describes what it's like to read a work cobbled together from quotes. The quotes themselves are fine, he says, but "then back again to the feigned taciturnity, the mania for the right word, the con job of the precise adjective…. Abstract gestures, paper frenzies, never a pair of hands raised to the breast in an outburst of true emotion."

This is brave, or at least bravado, because Prieto knows that he's describing his own writing. The glitter of Marbella is a tease, and the Mafiosi are only window dressing. Even the question of adaptation to a post-Communist world loses its urgency in this final volume of the trilogy. The real drama is a staging of the losing battle that Prieto's generation (and maybe all writers since Flaubert, depending on how you read Prieto) must wage against the literary titans of the past. Prieto's perversely heroic project is to succumb, to be tedious and recherché and secondhand, to wallow in his belatedness, to smother the real flashes of originality that surface here (and, more frequently, in *Enciclopedia*). The poignancy of this kamikaze mission is glimpsed more than once, particularly in a section in which J. seems to imagine rewriting the book, "erasing all trace of the Commentator's work, so that those years, seen from distant points on the scale, would not remain years of coldness, written by a man who did not fall in love, did not have children, and saw himself brought by the very nature of his stories—their bloodless na-

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ture—to a dubious protagonism."

This "dubious protagonism"—the protagonism of a J. who allows us glimpses of a possible José Manuel Prieto—may be the best a novelist can hope for at this anxious stage of literary history. And yet, despite himself, Prieto dreams of better. The harebrained scheme that J. and Nelly devise to escape the Mafiosi involves declaring Vasily the long-lost king of Russia (Vasily *Rex*), thus raising him above the gangsters' reach. Prieto's vision of Vasily as king swallows up the second half of the book and seems truly rapturous, as if a return to an uncomplicated form of divine rule might also mean the resurrection of the Writer. But his reveries are much less convincing than his skepticism, and the book closes up on itself, ejecting the reader from its hermetic embrace. ■

Toad Skin?

by LORNA SCOTT FOX

In the central states of Mexico, you see many brown *campesino* faces lit by green or hazel eyes. Locals say this is the only legacy of the French Intervention of 1862–67, when an army with its fair share of rapists and torturers tried to take over the country for its own good in the name of civilization, modernity and empire. On that occasion, "empire" was the official description. Mexican conservatives, horrified by the election in 1858 of a progressive Zapotec Indian, Benito Juárez, to the presidency, sent a delegation to Europe to ask the Austrian archduke Maximilian, brother of Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph, whether he'd like to come over and be emperor of Mexico. Maximilian demurred at first, preferring to go to Brazil for a spot of entomology. But under pressure and with financial sponsorship from yet another emperor, Napoleon III (who had already sent in the troops, ostensibly to force Juárez to resume debt payments, in reality to get his hands on the silver mines in the north while the United States was distracted by civil war), this classic frustrated younger son agreed to emigrate to the New World, relinquishing all rights to the Austrian succession.

Maximilian and his wife, Princess Charlotte of Belgium, were enthroned in 1864. The French, bolstered by Austrian and Belgian battalions, were on a roll: they had captured the capital the year before, and went on to take other cities. Juárez's government had retreated to Chihuahua. Only a year later, however, Republican forces began to push back. The new geopolitical situation was in their favor. Maximilian was isolated, having proved too liberal for his original backers in Mexico and too imperial to win over the progressives. Juárez was being armed by the United States, which as a salvo to France's flagrant challenge of the Monroe Doctrine, refused to recognize the puppet monarchy and sent 50,000 troops to the border in 1865. Napoleon III, bankrupted by the imperial couple's fancy tastes as well as the costs of the war, and facing a new Prussian and Russian threat to the east, lost interest in Maximilian—especially after the Empress "Carlota," as she now wished to be known, turned up in Europe to beg for funds and seemed, embarrassingly, to have gone mad. The French pulled out. Maximilian dithered. After fleeing the capital he was captured, possibly betrayed by an insider, in the town of Querétaro and executed, along with two of his Mexican generals, in June 1867.

Such are the bare bones of the story. But they are so deeply buried in the rich and bulging flesh of *News From the Empire* that I had to resort to Wikipedia to locate them with any certainty. Published in 1987, Fernando del Paso's third novel is a specimen of the Latin American new historical novel, whose greatest exponent is no doubt the Cuban Alejo Carpentier, and the best known, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa. During the second half of the twentieth century, the perennial fascination with identity and the tangle of European, indigenous and African roots that feeds Latin American culture was intensified by the approach of the quincentenary of the "Discovery" in 1492. The many fictionalized reworkings of historical episodes tended to be anything but positivist investigations, however. A quantum spirit prevailed, dubbed "Borgesian" in homage to the Argentine master. Its tenets included the unascertainable, relative nature of reality; the efficacy of distortion and exaggeration; the simultaneity of time; the infinite mirrorings of intertextuality and the dialectic between linear experience and a cyclical spiral of repetitions. That's why one often has to go elsewhere for some idea of what is broadly agreed to have happened; and you'd certainly do better to know the story before tackling this particular book.

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Fernando del Paso

News From the Empire
By Fernando del Paso.
Translated by Stella T. Clark and Alfonso González.
Dalkey Archive. 704 pp. $18.95.

News From the Empire contains twenty-three chapters. The first and last, plus the odd-numbered ones in between, are voiced by Carlota addressing the dead Max from Bouchout Castle, where she was kept until her death in 1927, and dated that year—allowing her to mix memories and fantasies with evocations of the dizzyingly different world of the early twentieth century. The even-numbered chapters are subdivided into three parts of various formats: dialogue, testimony, oral reminiscence, third-person narrative, stream of consciousness, letters and such. These scenes, while roughly chronological, break up the story into glimpses and sideshows, discourses and mannerisms, like a veritable inventory of baroque literary tricks. Given the prismatic elusiveness of the parts, it's hard to develop an overview along the way, and we must wait till the end for del Paso to tell us—apparently in his own voice—what he thinks about it all.

The gleeful account by a patriotic camp follower of the battle of Camarón, where an outnumbered Foreign Legion detachment was massacred at leisure; the florid lament of a cuckolded palace gardener; and the randy ramblings of a Basque priest, which indirectly describe local collaboration with the invaders, are among the more "popular" voices (aspects of which present, as always, insoluble challenges to the translator: "Yessir, in this here city there's a lot of racket"). These varied immersions into the experience of richly imagined anonymous figures, never in any sense naturalistic, epitomize del Paso's

Lorna Scott Fox is a journalist and translator based in London.

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Brechtian insistence on literary artifice. Among the crowns and titles, Napoleon III's suave discussion of realpolitik with Count Metternich at a masked ball contrasts with the naïveté, in another scene, of Maximilian's obsession with court ceremonial (he was, after all, creating a world from scratch): "'Oh, I forgot to mention, take note, *bitte*, the length of the division generals' swords will be eight hundred and thirty-five centimeters and their hilts made of wood,' as they sailed between Corsica and Sardinia, 'wood bound with toad skin.' 'Toad skin?' asked Carlota with a grimace of revulsion." He spends the whole voyage to Veracruz and much of his short reign obsessively specifying the minutiae of costume, ritual and etiquette, and at the end, awaiting execution, he is mainly concerned with the parting of his famous beard.

We hear nothing from top Republicans other than Juárez, who emerges as prim, tetchy, amazingly knowledgeable about the finer points of European dynastics, and disapproving of court ceremonial as the support of illegitimate power, religious or political; he also has an understandable chip about race. When we get to the deathbed scene in 1872, the style selects High Tragedy as Juárez hallucinates the corpse of the man he had no choice but to execute, fearing he faces the "judgment of Cain" and remembering the words of Voltaire: "'History is a joke,' the Frenchman said, 'that we the living play on the dead.'"

The novel flirts with this Cain-and-Abel conceit only to dismiss it, driving home the irony of political ideals superficially shared by two such different men—one born an archduke, the other an indigenous shepherd. The emperor is blinded by infantile aristocratic entitlement, whereas the president is grimly lucid. It makes no difference if the former upholds many of the latter's reforms, or wears a red Republican tie with his *charro* costume, or is a decent fellow with strict moral precepts. "Don Benito looked at the secretary over his glasses and said: 'And among these precepts, does the Archduke include respect for other people's rights, and the right of other nations to decide on their own form of government?'"

This is the crux of the matter, and it throws up striking parallels with events later than del Paso's book (in which US imperialism is, of course, a constant implicit target). Arrogant, warmongering France, self-appointed "guardian of freedom" and "police of the world," invades an internally conflicted country, persuaded by wily exiles that its soldiers will be welcomed with a "shower of roses" and assuming that the resources that are the real reason for the war (silver, in this case) will enable it to pay for itself. Wrong on all counts. Scattered through the book is also an eloquent deconstruction of the instrumental logic of racism and cultural condescension, set against such civilized practices as slavery, the Inquisition and the horrors of the Belgian Congo. This logic turns even magnanimity into proof of backwardness: "in his memoirs, Prince Salm-Salm is surprised that [Republican general] Escobedo didn't carry out his 'sinister promises' against him, Felix, after he had participated in a second attempt to allow Maximilian to escape, and adds that this—not fulfilling the threat of a particular punishment—would not have happened in a more civilized country." Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan del Paso, who spent twenty years in London and Paris as a broadcaster and cultural attaché, doesn't coddle the other side. Various voices address the Mexicans' own brand of violence and racism and their ambiguous allegiances, noting for instance the dilemma of educated liberals "invaded by the troops of a nation whose culture and ideals they consider their own."

Memoirs, histories, documents, previous fictions, sources of all kinds are pillars of the "historiographical" novel. This translates into explorations of uncertainty or contradiction, for where Count Corti says this, Montgomery Hyde asserts the other, while Emile Ollivier for his part demurs, and what of…? Yet only minor points are sabotaged in this way. Indeed, the relativity of historical truth is an intellectual truism, not especially subversive even in 1987. Paradoxically, despite the polyphony of viewpoints and ideologies, we are not really left to draw our own conclusions, as the premise would suggest. Napoleon, his wife and acolytes are scoundrels from every angle, Max is a silly but noble fool, and the whole affair presents a case study of the futile interventions of hubris and greed in the fate of nations. Napoleon could never have halted "what he called the 'sinister Anglo-Saxon and Protestant influence in Latin America.'" US hegemony was always inevitable, in this view.

Beyond his microscopic historiography, del Paso's erudition—typical of that period in Latin American letters, exploiting the analogy between book and universe first mooted by Borges and Márquez—is vast and not lightly worn. The merciless drip of largely superfluous data combines with the avoidance of plot and action to turn the reading of this work into a physical rather than imaginative experience: that of laboring through language. All the authorial masks, whatever their other traits, display the same tendency to sacrifice narrative to texture and dilute meaning by saturation. It is especially remarkable in the Carlota sections, structured as a floating counterpoint to the story. Deranged and mythomanic as she is, she controls an infinite supply of facts. Here (a selection almost at random) she recalls the Empress Eugénie, whose scheming got her and darling Max into this mess:

> I don't want to picture her swathed in a cloud of verbena perfume, shopping in the Lumière Salon of the House of Worth, crowned with the wreath of violets that Louis Napoleon gave her in Compiègne. I want her forever in Zululand, destroyed by the memory of the imperial prince who, at three, in a grenadier's hat and coat (but also in a white skirt, because they still dressed him like a girl) reviewed the French troops victorious in Magenta and Solferino; I want to see her furious because that stupid Victoria denied her the pleasure of touching, eating, and kissing the dirt where her Woolwich cadet, who never became Napoleon IV, finally succumbed.

She carries on for dozens of pages in this incantatory, fuming, precise yet aimless vein, mostly harangues of love and hate addressed to Maximilian, repeated rehearsals of the lies and betrayals they suffered, catalogs of the poisons she suspected everywhere ("but I am not speaking of the arsenic used to poison Pope Alexander Borgia, nor of the poisons with which Madame de Montespan, paramour of Louis XIV, wanted to kill her rivals. No, I am not speaking of cyanide, nor of belladonna, nor of the curare used by Brazilian Indians to kill Portuguese slave traders, nor of aconite, with which the Ghurkas poisoned the wells in Nepal…"), plus some fine, if rather too many, contributions to the literature of masturbation. "I walk nude in a room full of blind butterflies that caress my belly, my thighs, my buttocks, and the rims of my eyelids with their wing tips. You know something? I was always forbidden to slide down banisters. I was told that it was dangerous, that I could fall and be paralyzed. I liked to do it just to feel the hard wood between my legs."

While in the "narrative" sections she is shown as spoiled but practical, with a better head for government than her husband, the place Carlota is made to occupy in these monologues reiterates fusty sexist clichés: she

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is the madwoman in the attic, the site of the repressed, the irrational, the mythic, the oracular, the erotic. She perceives from her visionary perch the simultaneity of past and future—"the day you die, all of your days become one. And then it turns out that you, that all of us, have always been dead"—and is gradually revealed as embodying the spirit of Time and History. For she outlived her world, as del Paso reminds us in his final, magisterial summing-up: she outlived "not only Maximilian, Juárez, Napoleon, Eugénie and all the rest, but also a whole era, a whole concept of the history and destiny of mankind and of the idea that man had of himself and the universe." He doesn't hate her, despite delegating so many voices to gloat at her misfortunes. Of this pathetic couple, the playthings of their class and time as well as of Napoleon, he concludes:

> If nothing else, of all the major players, they deserve to be considered the ones who had the most extenuating circumstances to explain their crimes, to make them sympathetic to us, to their chroniclers, in the private judgment that each author is forced to make about the characters in his tragedy.

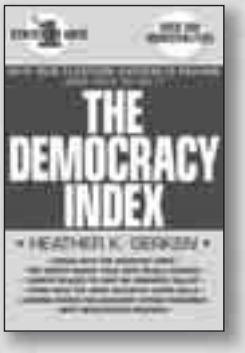
What's more, despite the absurdities of Max's infatuation with his new country (he should just start calling himself Meximilian, sniffs one character), he earned the right to shout "*Viva México*" as he fell, for he transformed his death "by force of will into a noble and meaningful death, into a courageous death. In a word, into a very Mexican death."

Hacking out a sinuous, branching path that connects fantasy with fact and allegory with analysis, seeking to reclaim "objective" history for a multitude of subjectivities (including the author's own), *News From the Empire* is a formidably ambitious and original experiment with the possibilities of a writing between genres. Yet when compared with the current fave-rave Latin American novelist, the late Roberto Bolaño—who can be similarly long-winded and disjointed, politically serious beneath the teasing manipulation of fiction and reality, yet who exudes a very different quality that could be called romantic austerity—del Paso's overblown didacticism, ironic archness and rhetorical conceits come together in a package that feels dated. This is a book that deservedly made waves when it came out, but outside academe, today, it may well remain more admired than loved. ■

Poem

at 82 I find everything erotic—
that's the stomping ground
of all intelligence—
the intellect picks it up
from the ground
and
gives language
as a kind of music
to dance around

ROBIN BLASER



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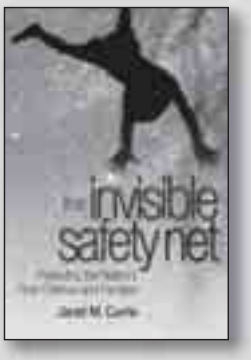

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Adaptation

by WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

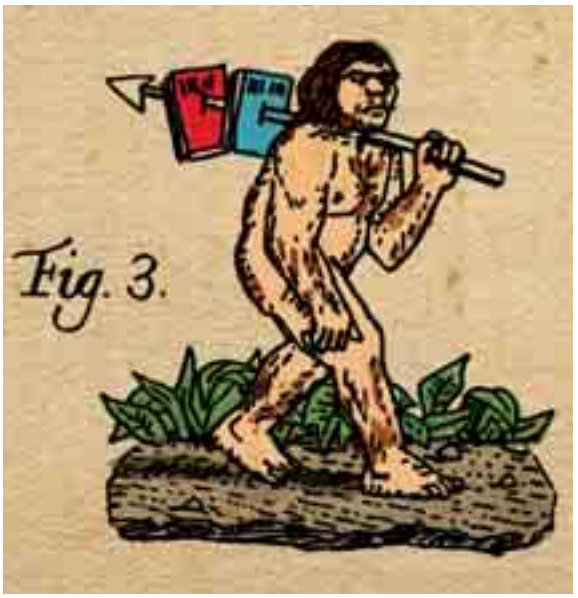
It leads you out of the maze into a new gaudy lecture-room where MacCann, with one hand on The Origin of Species *and the other hand on the new testament, tells you that you admired the great flanks of Venus because you felt that she would bear you burly offspring and admired her great breasts because you felt that she would give good milk to her children and yours.*

—*James Joyce*, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

The appeal of evolutionary psychology is easy to grasp. Just think of *Annie Hall*. The last few decades have left us so profoundly disoriented about the most urgent personal matters—gender roles, sexual norms, the possibility of creating lasting romantic relationships, not to mention absolutely everything to do with family structure—that it's no surprise to find people embracing a theory that promises to restore order. Once we had religion to tell us who we are. Then, for a while, we had Freud. Now we have evolutionary psychology, which, as an attempt to construct a science of human nature on Darwinian principles, marshals two of the most powerful ideas in contemporary culture: science, our most authoritative way of knowing, and nature, our highest ground of moral appeal. No wonder the field is catnip to journalists and armchair theorists alike. Equip yourself with a few basic concepts—natural selection, inclusive fitness, mating choice—and you, too, can explain the mysteries of human existence. That evolutionary psychology has no real intellectual credibility, that mainstream biology regards it as a house of sand, rarely seems to come up. EP is the Malcolm Gladwell of science: facile and glib, but so persuasive and charming that no one wants to ruin the fun.

To be fair, the problem lies less in the field's goals than in its claims. Much of its opposition is misguided and out-of-date. For a long time, evolutionary approaches to human behavior were discredited by the specter of Social Darwinism. More recently, the concept of a unitary human nature has been condemned as a form of bourgeois universalism—that is, of disguised ethnocentrism. But those who reject the notion of human psychology as a product of evolution (that is, of nature rather than culture) would undoubtedly recoil at the idea that human physiology is *not* a product of evolution. The only alternative is creationism. And if our bodies have evolved, then so have our minds, which a materialist philosophy (one that doesn't depend on supernatural entities like the Christian soul) must regard as *products* of our bodies—of our brains, nerves, sense organs and so forth. Surely no one would dispute that there is a universal bee nature or dog nature or chimpanzee nature. Why not then acknowledge, at least in principle, a universal human nature, however various its elaborations in culture?

The question is, What does it consist of, how did it arise and can we discover it? Here is where evolutionary psychology falls down. EP claims that the human mind evolved in the Pleistocene, the 1.6 million years during which *Homo sapiens* emerged on the African savanna. EP seeks to identify apparently innate and cross-culturally universal aspects of human behavior (like speech), then tries to construct scenarios to explain why such behaviors would have been adaptive—would have promoted individual or collective survival and reproduction—in the Pleistocene environment. This all sounds reasonable until you discover that: (1) we don't actually know what the Pleistocene environment looked like; (2) we don't know how our Pleistocene ancestors lived; and (3) we now believe that evolution might happen a lot faster than we used to think, so much of our psychology may not be a product of the Pleistocene at all but of the 10,000 years since the emergence of civilization. There are other problems with the stories that EP likes to make up about how we got to be the way we are. They still have no support in genetics. If something's not genetic, it's not evolved. Also, not all behaviors (or physiological structures) are the result of selection pressures. Some are by-products of other capacities, as literacy clearly is. Some are the result of functional shifts (insects' wings, for example, seem to have developed at first to regulate heat). Finally, there are some deeply ingrained human behaviors that seem very hard to justify in adaptive terms.



It is with a particular class of these that literary Darwinism—and Darwinian aesthetics in general—is concerned. Human beings expend an enormous amount of energy doing things that don't seem to have any survival value: singing, dancing, painting caves, decorating spears and, above all, telling stories. (Think how much time you spend consuming fictional narratives—novels, movies, TV shows—in one form or another.) The nascent field of Darwinian aesthetics seeks to account for the art-making impulse in evolutionary psychological terms. If art is a product of the mind, and the mind is a product of evolution, then art is a product of evolution. Again, as an intellectual project, this is perfectly valid. But there are also strong selection pressures pushing in the direction of such an approach. Evolutionary thinking is, at present, an aggressively expansive species within the academic world, a kind of emergent *Homo sapiens* outcompeting the old-school Neanderthals across a wide swath of intellectual territory. Having colonized the social sciences—where it has begun to displace the view, predominant throughout the twentieth century, that the mind is a highly malleable product of culture—it has now set its sights on the humanities, the last area of resistance. To subdue it would mean realizing E.O. Wilson's dream of "consilience" (Wilson is, among many other things, the godfather of evolutionary psychology), the unification of the domains of knowledge, from physics all the way up to aesthetics, on the basis of a single set of principles.

William Deresiewicz is a Nation *contributing writer. He was nominated for a 2009 National Magazine Award for reviews and criticism.*

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The humanities, meanwhile, are undergoing their own struggle for survival within the academic ecosystem. Budgets are shrinking, students are disappearing, faculty positions are being lost, institutional prestige has all but evaporated. As the Darwinists are quick to point out, a lot of this suffering is self-inflicted. In literary studies in particular, the last several decades have witnessed the baleful reign of "Theory," a mash-up of Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian social theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis and other assorted abstrusiosities, the overall tendency of which has been to cut the field off from society at large and from the main currents of academic thought, not to mention the common reader and common sense. Theory, which tends toward dogmatism, hermeticism, hero worship and the suppression of doctrinal deviation—not exactly the highest of mental virtues—rejects the possibility of objective knowledge and, in its commitment to the absolute nature of cultural "difference," is dead set against the notion of human universals. Theory has led literary studies into an intellectual and institutional cul-de-sac, and now that its own energies have been exhausted (the last major developments date to the early '90s), it has left it there.

Enter the literary Darwinists, a still-small but militant insurgency dedicated to overthrowing the existing order in favor of a diametrically opposite approach. Their goal is not only to reseat literary studies on a basis of evolutionary thinking but to found a "new humanities," as the title of one book puts it, on scientific principles: empirical, quantitative, systematic, positivist, progressive. Instead of theory giving way to equally fanciful theory and interpretation succeeding equally subjective interpretation, literary studies would henceforth involve the gradual accumulation of objectively verifiable knowledge and thus a "shrinking [of] the space of possible explanation" such as has occurred in the sciences, where all research must either situate itself within the framework of existing theory or challenge it directly. And just as chemistry rests on physics and biology on chemistry, the foundation on which the humanities would rest, following the logic of consilience, would be the new biological theory of the human mind (the thing that produces the humanities in the first place): evolutionary psychology.

Literary Darwinism dates back to the mid-'90s, with the publication of Joseph Carroll's *Evolution and Literary Theory*, but the field has picked up steam of late (and like all things evolutionary psychological, garnered a healthy amount of media attention). *The Literary Animal*, with contributions from more than a dozen scholars, came out in 2005. Last year, Jonathan Gottschall, the field's most prominent young voice (and energetic propagandist), published two works, *The Rape of Troy*, a Darwinian study of Homer, and *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities*, a blueprint for disciplinary transformation. Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct*, which covers the arts more generally, came out earlier this year. Dutton, founder of the Arts & Letters Daily website, is also editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, which has become the go-to journal for Darwinian literary scholarship—no doubt in part because such work is shunned by mainstream academic publications. (The tendency among literary Darwinists to cast themselves as an embattled minority may be self-dramatizing, not to mention self-pitying, but that doesn't mean it's wrong, and it explains their desire to appeal over the heads of the gatekeepers to the popular press.) Finally, Brian Boyd, the Nabokov scholar, has just produced *On the Origin of Stories*, which, as the title suggests, aspires to be a major synthesis.

Books discussed in this article:

Literary Darwinism
Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature.
By Joseph Carroll.
Routledge. 276 pp. $32.95.

The Literary Animal
Evolution and the Nature of Narrative.
Edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson.
Northwestern. 304 pp. $29.95.

The Rape of Troy
Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer.
By Jonathan Gottschall.
Cambridge. 223 pp. $34.99.

Literature, Science, and a New Humanities.
By Jonathan Gottschall.
Palgrave MacMillan. 217 pp. $26.95.

The Art Instinct
Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution.
By Denis Dutton.
Bloomsbury. 278 pp. $25.

On the Origin of Stories
Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction.
By Brian Boyd.
Harvard. 540 pp. $35.

The literary Darwinian project—and that of Darwinian aesthetics in general—falls into two broad categories: theory and criticism. The first seeks to explain why literature or art evolved in the first place, the second to understand individual works, authors, genres and so forth in the light of Darwinian insights. As a theoretical effort, literary Darwinism is a direct extension of evolutionary psychology, though in some ways it sets itself against the parent discipline. Evolutionary psychology has had a tendency to trivialize the arts. Steven Pinker, EP's popularizer par excellence, sees the arts as nothing more than mental "cheesecake," useless technologies designed to stimulate evolved pleasure centers the way junk food hijacks our once-adaptive tendency to seek out fats and sweets. Pinker even warns against "invent[ing] functions for activities that lack design merely because we want to ennoble them with the imprimatur of biological adaptiveness."

Darwinian aesthetics has responded to this challenge along a number of lines. Carroll, still a major player in the field, argues that fiction in particular evolved as a form of cognitive regulation. With the vast new realms of mental possibility opened up by the explosion of human intelligence around 40,000 years ago, storytelling, with its integration of the emotional and the conceptual, emerged as a way of bringing order to our newly complex inner world. Dutton, whose chapter on fiction largely follows Carroll, sees music, dance and the visual arts in terms of sexual rather than natural selection. In natural selection, the environment determines which organisms will survive long enough to reproduce. In sexual selection, organisms themselves—in most cases, the female of the species—decide whom to reproduce with. Sexual selection was Darwin's answer to the conundrum of phenomena like the peacock's tail, anatomical features that seem superfluous and even maladaptive. Peacocks have big tails, the thinking goes, because peahens like them, and peahens like them because they provide a handy "fitness test." A healthy tail means a healthy peacock—a peacock with good genes to pass on to its offspring. This, Dutton claims, is why music, art and dance first developed: to woo women with displays of fitness, a history still evident, he says, in the overwhelming proportion of popular songs that talk of love.

Boyd, a clearer and more careful thinker than most of these other writers, rebuts the sexual-selection hypothesis by noting that animals mainly sing for purposes of cooperation, not sexual display. His highly intelligent, impressively learned and patiently elaborated

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theory of the origin of fiction and the other arts begins with the idea that art is cognitive play. Humans and other intelligent species engage in prolonged periods of physical play as children—mock combat, feats of balance and coordination—in order to train themselves to deal with situations they will face as adults. Art, beginning with the songs of mothers and infants, trains our minds. Cognition is, first and foremost, pattern recognition, and art is concentrated pattern. But humans are also intensely social animals—the source of our evolutionary success—and the life of small human groups, as primate studies suggest (and everyday experience confirms), requires a constant effort of social cognition: eye contact, shared attention, awareness of status hierarchies, sensitivity to what others may be feeling, intending, discovering, believing. That's where storytelling comes in. For what are our stories about if not the interpersonal dynamics of small human groups, whether the warriors at Troy or the courtiers at Elsinore? Fiction, Boyd claims, is the way we train our minds for the vital business of social existence.

Other benefits follow. Fiction extends our range of experience, teaches empathy, develops the prosocial emotions and enhances creativity by encouraging us to imagine alternative possibilities. This is all very attractive. I, for one, agree with Boyd that fiction confers these blessings, and while Pinker's ideas of nobility may differ a bit from my own (survival not being, in my view, the highest of aspirations), I am perfectly prepared to accept that fiction's functions emerged for evolutionary reasons. Diffusion of Boyd's ideas might even, in our utilitarian and scientistic society, restore the prestige of the arts and humanities, and who knows, maybe even their funding. Imagine the *Times* headline: Researchers Find Arts Have Value.

But the attractiveness of a theory is no brief for its validity. Because storytelling, absent literacy, leaves no record, Boyd's reasoning rests entirely on analogy and deduction. Primates do this, children do that, contemporary hunter-gatherers do the other; therefore this is what primitive humans must have done. Fiction serves these functions now; therefore it always has. This kind of thinking may be clever, but it isn't science. It also overlooks the crucial phenomenon of functional shift. What evolved for one purpose can end up developing many others. It further assumes that we know not only when storytelling began, 40,000 or 100,000 years ago rather than 10,000, but when *fictional* storytelling began. For the question of fictionality is one of the most vexed in this whole area of study. It is easy to see why ancient hunter-gatherers might have told factual stories: "When Ogg tried to cross the big woods, he was eaten by a pig"; "Wilma found much good eggs beneath the spotted bird." But why would anyone want to tell stories that don't have that kind of truth value? More to the point, when did we start doing so? The question becomes sharper when we remember that stories that look fictional to us may not have seemed so to their original audience. Homer did not think he was making fiction. Indeed, when the novel began to re-establish itself during the Renaissance, it took several centuries for European culture to accustom itself to the notion of fictionality—the idea that something can be true without being factual.

Boyd has indeed produced a theory, but only in the common sense of the word: a bright idea that doesn't have a lot of evidence to back it up. Much the same can be said of literary Darwinism in general, which necessarily shares the vices of its parent discipline: armchair speculation, blithe conjecture and bald assertion. ("Writing is much younger than cave painting, but fictional storytelling is far older.") "No doubt" and "it seems very likely" stand in for observation and proof. Hypotheses in one chapter become axioms in the next. Dutton quotes Pinker on the universality of language—listening to unknown tongues, Pinker says, "I imagine seeing through the rhythms to the structures underneath, and sense that we all have the same minds"—without seeming to grasp that Steven Pinker's feelings do not constitute scientific evidence. And while most of these writers are more sensible, Carroll trades freely in the ethnocentrism and lack of historical perspective that have brought EP into disrepute ("Western achievements do in fact represent the highest level yet attained by any culture"; "society…is still in the process of conducting experiments in such matters as dissolving the nuclear family"). He also suffers from a bad case of what we might call Frye's disease (after the great critic Northrop Frye), an excessive attachment to taxonomic schemas (the two "psycho-physiological" orientations, the "five factors of personality," the "seven basic emotions").

Most important, the Darwinists commit the very sin of which they (rightly) accuse the acolytes of Theory: ignoring contradictory evidence. Dutton may be the worst offender. To take just one example, he opens *The Art Instinct* by discussing a study that found that when people around the world were polled about the kind of painting they most wished to see, the overwhelming preference was for a landscape with people, water and animals. Dutton interprets this predilection in evolutionary psychological terms: humans want to look at scenes that resemble the Pleistocene savanna. But he not only dismisses Arthur Danto's culturalist interpretation—that the preference reflects the global diffusion of Western calendar art—without subjecting it to serious evaluation, he also neglects evidence that undermines his own theory. As he notes, the same study discovered that the world's favorite color is blue, not green, and others have found that landscape preferences typically include post-Pleistocene features like roads, cottages and fields. He also fails to mention that only three of the fourteen countries represented in the preference poll lie outside of Europe and North America, or that the respondents were self-selected.

The tendency of Dutton's ideas to disintegrate under pressure is typical of evolutionary psychology. Rather than testifying to the novelty and vigor of the field, the diversity of theories within Darwinian aesthetics—Carroll's cognitive regulation, Dutton's sexual selection, Boyd's cognitive play and so forth—merely shows how feeble they all are. Choosing among them would be like trying to decide which imaginary girlfriend to sleep with. Besides, the true test of a theory is application. As Boyd says, "Evolutionary literary criticism will be worth a detour into biology and psychology only if it deepens our understanding and appreciation of literature." So far, the record is not good, and for entirely predictable reasons. Evolutionary psychology is a theory about what all human beings have in common. It cannot, by definition, tell us why individual cultures differ from one another, still less why individual works or authors do. But such differences are precisely what criticism wants to know: how Roman theater emerged from Greek forms; what made the novel such an important mode of expression in nineteenth-century Russia; why love looks different in Petrarch than it does in Sade. Answering such questions requires not a generic idea of human nature but a fine-grained and deeply informed knowledge of historically particular human cultures.

Again and again, Darwinian criticism sets out to say something specific, only to end up telling us something general. An essay that purports to explain Shakespeare's preeminence as a playwright argues instead that drama appeals to us because it portrays the social dynamics of small human groups (as evidenced by the fact that Shakespeare's casts range from eighteen to forty-seven characters). Boyd devotes a hundred pages to the

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Odyssey without saying anything he couldn't have said with *Anna Karenina* or *Middlemarch* or Proust. The discussion is nothing more than an illustration of Darwinian ideas, not an explication of Homeric meanings. Indeed, it's an illustration of largely one idea, that before an artist can even worry about meanings, he needs to figure out how to hold his audience's attention. If the point sounds banal, that is squarely within the emerging disciplinary tradition. I have read any number of Darwinian essays about *Pride and Prejudice* (one critic calls it their "fruit fly"), but I have yet to read one that told me anything interesting. The idea that the novel is about mate selection does not count as an original contribution.

Literary Darwinism's reductive tendencies enforce an impoverished view of both literature and life. Because it deals only with fiction and drama, the narrative modes, the field ignores one of the three major branches of literature, lyric poetry, altogether. Then there is the sensitivity with which it handles the things it does address. "Genre," Carroll says, "is largely a matter of feeling—tragedy is sad, and comedy happy." First of all, genre is not largely a matter of feeling; it is largely a matter of form. Second, Carroll's scheme leaves no room for mixed cases like dark comedy or tragicomedy. Third, *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear* may leave us feeling many things—stunned, emptied, exhilarated, exalted; Aristotle's catharsis of pity and terror will probably never be improved upon as a description of that unique state—but "sad" is not one of them. Another study cracks the conundrum of *Hamlet*. It turns out the play is about choosing between personal self-interest (taking over the kingdom by killing your uncle) and genetic self-interest (letting Mummy provide you with a few siblings, who would carry a share of your genes). Aside from being completely daft, and missing everything important about the play, this reading ignores the fact that, with a 30-year-old son, Gertrude is not going to be having any more babies anytime soon.

The exception to all this is *The Rape of Troy*. Gottschall's study of Homer is prudent, patient, thoroughly researched and very smart. Gottschall argues that the violence of Homeric society reflects the struggle among men over reproductive resources—mainly women, of course—in self-reinforcing conditions of scarcity. He draws not only on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but on archaeology, anthropology and the history of Homeric scholarship to illuminate neglected aspects of the epics and put together a wide-ranging understanding of the behavior of Homer's characters, holding out the promise that Darwinian insights might, as part of a far larger battery of critical tools, prove useful to literary scholarship. Still, there are problems. Gottschall can explain the ordinary course of Homeric behavior, but he can't explain the exceptions. He can't explain moments when the meaning of an action is literary rather than anthropological (like Odysseus' "bizarre cruelty" in concealing himself from his old father, the climax of the theme of disguise), and he can't explain behavior that rises above the norm. In other words, he can't explain the poems' essential subject: heroism. Why does Achilles sacrifice himself to avenge a beloved friend when his status as a great warrior is already secure and he knows he can retire to a long and fertile life at home? Why does Odysseus risk years of peril at sea to return to a wife who can no longer provide him with offspring when he could be scattering his seed across the Mediterranean?

In any case, Gottschall has moved on to other things. His second book represents an initial glimpse at the brave new world of the "new humanities" that its title foresees. Gottschall doesn't just want to make literary studies Darwinian, he wants to make it quan-

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titative. So we get statistical analyses of folk tale collections designed to show that the obsession with female beauty is not confined to the West, or that romantic love is a human universal. Forthcoming work, undertaken with Carroll and others, uses polling data to disprove the postmodern belief in "the death of the author" by showing that writers really do have an effect on the way people react to their books. There are several things to say about this and similar work. For one thing, a lot of it isn't literary at all. It simply uses literature as a source of data for social-scientific investigation, and it takes no cognizance of literary form—that is, of what makes literature different from other modes of discourse. For another, unlike fields such as criminology or public health that were transformed by the introduction of statistical methods, literary studies is not concerned with large classes of phenomena of which individual cases are merely interchangeable and aggregable examples. It is concerned, precisely, with individual cases, and very few of them at that: the rare works of value that stand out from the heap of dross produced in every age.

Finally, these common-sense conclusions about beauty, love and the death of the author are noteworthy only in relation to the nonsense of Theory. That such arguments need to be made in the first place only shows what a pass we have come to. If literary Darwinism does nothing more than discredit the old paradigm, it will have done very well indeed. But it will, I fear, do a great deal more. The Darwinists have a research program, and few things in the academy are more powerful than that. Gottschall wants to put readers in MRI machines to test their responses, though he is also willing to take advantage of less expensive technologies, like "simple salivary swabs that can provide hormonal indicators of emotions experienced during reading." Carroll lauds a study that analyzed the creative process by giving subjects a personality test "to determine their position on a scale of Machiavellianism," then had them write short stories. Hearing of such remarkable schemes, I feel I've been transported, with Gulliver, to the Academy of Lagado, where one sage endeavored to extract sunbeams from cucumbers, and another sought to restore ordure to the condition of food.

Seeking to displace Theory, literary Darwinism may end by becoming it. Each is reductive. Each leads in outlandish directions that make sense only to initiates. Each has a penchant for hero worship. (For Dutton, the father of natural selection is not "Darwin," but "Darwin himself." Carroll makes a trinity of Darwin, Wilson and Pinker.) Each is predictable. If Marxist criticism is always about the rise of the bourgeoisie, literary Darwinism is always about mate selection or status competition. Each looks to literature only for confirmation of its beliefs. Shakespeare, it turns out, agrees with Darwin, as he once agreed with Freud and Frye. (Though if science is the exclusive standard of truth for the Darwinists, it's not clear why it matters whom Shakespeare agrees with.) Authors who won't get with

Quarto

1.
Call me Sebastian, arrows sticking all over
The map of my battlefields. Marathon.
Wounded Knee. Vicksburg. Jericho.
Battle of the Overpass.
Victories turned inside out
But no surrender

Cemeteries of remorse
The beaten champion sobbing
Ghosts move in to shield his tears

2.
No one writes lyric on a battlefield
On a map stuck with arrows
But I think I can do it if I just lurk
In my tent pretending to
Refeather my arrows

I'll be right there! I yell
When they come with their crossbows and white phosphorous
To recruit me

Crouching over my drafts
lest they find me out
and shoot me

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the program—who don't deal with mate selection or status competition, or refuse to solicit our attention in evolutionarily correct ways—are demoted in rank. (Darwinian aesthetics exhibits a strong antimodernist animus, as if it were unnatural to prefer Conrad to Kipling, or Rothko to Rockwell.) That so many of the greatest works of literary art—the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, the novels of Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Woolf and Coetzee—are ultimately concerned not with mate selection or status competition, however seriously they might consider such matters, but with the human place in the cosmos; that such a commitment is precisely what begins to distinguish these works from the kinds of things that are better studied with polling data and cheek swabs; that the finest books demand a criticism that attends to what makes them unique, not what makes them typical: these are not possibilities that literary Darwinism envisions.

It is all too easy to foresee a future for literary criticism of MRI machines and statistical charts. (Finally, something the rest of the university can relate to!) English departments will turn themselves over to brain scans just as they turned themselves over to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. When that future arrives, what will the classroom look like? Will it be a new gaudy lecture room where Brian Boyd, with one hand on *The Origin of Species* and the other hand on *Consilience*, tells you that "We may compare Lear's rage with the fury of an alpha male chimpanzee deposed from dominance, or note the sudden spike in levels of the stress hormone cortisol in animals that suffer loss in rank"? That really would be the death of humanism, not to mention the English major. Even if literary Darwinism were grounded in real science, it could never replace the subjective encounter with a text that lies at the heart of all reading and should lie at the heart of all pedagogy and all criticism. It is not Theory that has prevented literary studies from becoming a positivistic discipline; it is the nature of literature itself. That interpretation succeeds interpretation in a seemingly endless cycle is not a weakness of criticism but its essential strength. The great works persist because they have the power, in every age, to make us ask the most important questions, which are the ones that have no answers, or rather, that have only personal answers: What are we doing here? What does it feel like to be alive? What should we do with our time on earth?

Darwinian aesthetics abjures the notion that science can replace art, but its idea of the latter is curiously small. For Dutton, the purpose of art is to "amuse, shock, titillate, and enrapture." For Boyd, "Science can explain human nature, but art's role is not to explain but to engage and to evoke." Both seem to miss the fact that science and art are different ways of knowing, equally valid but incommensurate. I can give you a scientific explanation of a moonrise, or I can say, with Verlyn Klinkenborg, that the moon rose like "a fat man climbing a ladder." The first understanding is rational and objective; the second is emotive, experiential, even somatic. Literary Darwinism will point out that the second can *itself* be explained in scientific terms, since the perception of metaphor is undoubtedly mediated by brain cells and neurotransmitters, just as Lear must have felt a wicked spike in his cortisol levels. In other words, while art is subjective, criticism doesn't need to be. But it does. The purpose of criticism is to understand the experience of art in experiential terms—in human terms, not numerical ones.

There is much talk among the literary Darwinists and their allies about not wanting to go back to the days of "old-boy humanism," with its "impressionistic" reading and "belletristic" writing. (Only in English departments could good writing be considered a bad thing.) But no matter the age or gender of the practitioner, any really worthwhile criticism will share the expressive qualities of literature itself. It will be personal, because art is personal. It will not be definitive; it will not be universally valid. It will be a product of its times, though it will see beyond those times. It will not satisfy the dean's desire for accumulable knowledge, the parent's desire for a marketable skill or the Congressman's desire for a generation of technologists. All it will do is help us understand who we are, where we came from and where we're going. Until the literary academy is willing to stand up in public and defend that mission without apology, it will never find its way out of the maze. ■

3.
Press your cheek against my medals, listen through them to my heart
Doctor, can you see me if I'm naked?

Spent longer in this place than in the war
No one comes but rarely and I don't know what for

Went to that desert as many did before
Farewell and believing and hope not to die

Hope not to die and what was the life
Did we think was awaiting after

Lay down your stethoscope back off on your skills
Doctor can you see me when I'm naked?

4.
I'll tell you about the mermaid
Sheds swimmable tail Gets legs for dancing
Sings like the sea with a choked throat
Knives straight up her spine
Lancing every step
There is a price
There is a price
For every gift
And all advice

ADRIENNE RICH

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BACK TALK

ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

Philip Alcabes

In the fall of 2001, friends worried about anthrax started asking Philip Alcabes, an epidemiologist at Hunter College, if they should be ironing their mail. Alcabes was struck by how these New Yorkers seemed more alarmed by the anthrax panic, in which five people died, than they were by the World Trade Center attacks, which claimed 2,752 lives. Alcabes's new book, *Dread* (Public Affairs, $26.95), is about the complex relationship between epidemics and the fears, anxieties and misconceptions that surround them. —*Christine Smallwood*

What links modern epidemics with cholera and the plague?

Some of the ideas people have about epidemics today are really just the latest chapter in a very long story. The fear of the stranger goes back at least to the plague of Athens, around 400 BC. Thucydides wrote that people said it came from Ethiopia, which was the Athenians' name for part of Africa. Already at that time people were talking about epidemics to verify anxieties they had.

Do you have a favorite anecdote from the book?

There's a line in Susan Sontag's essay "AIDS and Its Metaphors" about how during the time of the Black Death, cities and towns in Western Europe killed Jews. By my estimate, at least 10,000 Jews were killed in a quite organized way during a very short period, two or three years, in the late 1340s when the Black Death came. Now, the killing was organized, for the fourteenth century, but it turns out that many people didn't really hold the Jews responsible for the plague. In fact, they often burned or killed Jews or expelled them *before* the plague arrived. Fortunately, we generally don't burn people at the stake anymore when we think there's an epidemic coming, but you do see this same kind of panic.

Where do you see that happening now?

We're less insistent that the epidemics we talk about concern diseases at all, or have a definable set of causes. We talk about epidemics in order to point the finger at someone we suspect, or to highlight the way that some social crisis seems to be a validation of some set of anxieties. The leading example is the obesity "epidemic." Obesity wasn't talked about as a disease until the mid-'90s, and the panic about obesity is even more recent than that. Although it does seem there are people for whom obesity is really dangerous and maybe deadly, the best study I know of attributes a little less than 5 percent of American deaths to obesity in some way or another, but something like 34 percent of Americans are considered obese by the body mass index standard. Most of the obese are not dying of obesity. In fact, most of those who are labeled obese don't get the leading diseases that can be produced by obesity, which are diabetes and hypertension.

What's going on?

For Americans, there's an endless conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. We're always enthralled by our own appetites and also repelled by them. There is very little concern for the suffering of people who are overweight. If we're adducing evidence that people who are overweight and obese get sick, then you would think that we would be concerned about the pain and suffering that arises from the illness. But in our society we think thin is beautiful, and therefore there's a social marginalization that comes from being extremely fat, and maybe not even extremely.

There is a persistent idea that epidemics are punishment.

We know enough about the hegemony of the Catholic Church when the plague came to late medieval Europe in 1347 to say that people thought it was a punishment from God because they hadn't been worshiping properly. And yet, AIDS comes in the 1980s, and quite educated people are talking about it as a punishment for tolerating homosexuality. It may not be surprising that the real ancients, before the Hebrews, before the ancient Greeks, understood disease as enchantment: you got sick because the spirits were up to something. Despite all our science and our devotion to science—there's a way that science is a secular religion today—we often have these suspicions about punishment, that something bad is being done by unseen spirits.

Does germ theory obscure the social conditions of disease?

Among some reformers there's an impetus to improve the lot of the poor, for reasons of charity or justice or practicality—*those people* are ill dressed and ill washed and ill fed, they're going to get diseases that they could spread to us, so even though we might not care about them, it might be in our best interest to help them out. In fact, that's an important impetus for the beginnings of liberal social reform in England in the 1830s. In a way, germ theory scotches a lot of the discussion about helping the poor, because germs provide a focus for those same kinds of worries, fantasies and fears about punishment, enchantment and bad spirits. Germs take on much of that anxiety and deflect attention from the lot of the poor.

You've written that it's impossible to eliminate risk from life.

I think life's short and everybody dies. Something bad is going to happen, and it will happen to you one day. Your hope, like mine about myself, is that it will be a long time from now. Do I think that means we should just lie down and take it? On the contrary. We could do a lot more to alleviate people's suffering. Even the health professions are not sufficiently concerned about suffering. It's often easy for us to mount these crusades about obesity, or crystal meth addiction, and lose sight of the way that people suffer because of these things and are harmed or stigmatized by the very crusade that's been mounted, apparently, to help them. ■

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MAJO KELESHIAN

Approximations 6, 2006, by MaJo Keleshian. Keleshian's *Approximations* series is the subject of Jennifer Moxley's poem "Seven Days," included in *Clampdown*.

Comfort and Agony

by ANGE MLINKO

In 1996, when Jennifer Moxley's first book, *Imagination Verses*, was published to underground acclaim, the prevailing story was that, like the return of the repressed, the personal lyric had been reborn from the chance encounter of a girl genius and a violently anti-lyrical avant-garde. *Imagination Verses* was almost old-fashioned—full of love poems and soliloquies. But Moxley's ear was decidedly trained by writers outside the mainstream anthologies: not Elizabeth Bishop or Sylvia Plath but experimental small-press poets like Bernadette Mayer and Rae Armantrout. Now some may see Moxley as a harbinger of the big poetic trend of the 2000s, sometimes known as "lyric postmodernism" or "hybrid poetics." This is a genre that has embraced the subjective "I" while rejecting the confessional voice; at the same time, it has appropriated the house style of the avant-garde, acute fracture and abstraction, while shedding its political baggage. What serves as content, finally, is language that speaks itself, an oracle mediating between poet and world, individual and history. It's the very definition of poetry set out by Theodor Adorno in his 1957 essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society." We are concerned, he said, "not with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history."

Clampdown
By Jennifer Moxley.
Flood Editions. 87 pp. $14.95.

Moxley knows her Adorno. The follow-up to *Imagination Verses* was a chapbook called *Wrong Life*, a title cribbed from Adorno's famous *aperçu*: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly." Much of Moxley's work can be read in the light of this damning little sentence and the chapter it punctuates in *Minima Moralia*, "Refuge for the Homeless." Moxley's ethical anxieties emanate from a central unease, unease at home, and ripple out to touch nation, earth and cosmos. But unlike the legions of poets who now adopt (and inevitably flatten) an Adornian mode of lyric, Moxley does not sublimate her psychology and social perspective. *Clampdown*, her new collection of poems, is startlingly particular, privacy-shattering and abject. It isn't postmodern or experimental or hybrid, and parts of it aren't even very lyrical—often she tones down her flights of gorgeous language to speak precisely and discursively, as if face to face with an interlocutor. Never uncontrolled, never artless and never not in command of rhetoric, Moxley has written a book that could be available to a wide readership. Her expressive clarity, however, lures us into a universe of such self-doubt and self-cancellations that we find ourselves again, dialectically, in the company of Adorno: "Wrong life cannot be lived rightly." From "The Price of Silence":

> It is suffocating beneath this vinyl
> window,
> in whose fake glued-on mullions we
> see a cross.
> But it doesn't mean anything. No
> word
> can be uttered or kept in store to
> chant us
> out of losing. The whir of the washing
> machine
> as it pours detergent down the sewer
> pipes,
> chlorine rising up from the drains.
> The compact
> fluorescent bulb in the gooseneck
> lamp
> with a broken spring neither mutters
> nor sputters playfully. Things don't
> speak
> our distance. The phone, though
> loud, tinny,
> and insistent, cannot, it seems, be
> found.
> We oppress in a way we cannot pay
> for
> in any direct or meaningful way. All is
> fake.
>
> Why should we awake?

Clampdown takes its title from a song on the Clash's *London Calling* ("When we're working for the clampdown/We will teach

Ange Mlinko, the recipient of the Randall Jarrell Award in Poetry Criticism from the Poetry Foundation, lives in New York's Hudson Valley. Her most recent book of poems is Starred Wire.

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our twisted speech/To the young believers"). Its doubt-ridden angst, though, is more neoliberal-era Radiohead than post-punk Clash. This is not party music for the Revolution; it's part "Karma Police," part "The Bends," Thom Yorke elegiacally singing "I wish it were the sixties/I wish we could be happy." "The Price of Silence," like other poems in the book—"Mother Night," "These Yearly Returns," "Friday Night, Candles Out"—puts Moxley's comfortable home and habits on display in a ritual of self-mockery and pathos. Christmas especially comes in for the full Moxley treatment; her *oeuvre* is scattered with merciless holiday poems, and *Clampdown* contains the best of them:

> Right before the darkness turned
> around
> and began to head in the other
> direction,
> I had a dream that you and I were
> decorating
> the Christmas tree and I asked you,
> as we hung the aging trinkets—the
> crippled
> pinecone elf, the dry construction-
> paper Santa,
> the several odd souvenirs from
> cultures
> both Christian and un-Christian,
> bought by my well-meaning parents
> in homage to that naïve dream
> formerly known as "the family of
> man"—

"Mother Night" goes on to describe that naïve dream, structured as a question from Moxley and a response from her spouse as they decorate the tree. She asks, "How much goodwill would it take/…to renew the genuine warmth/we used to feel towards one another?" He answers, "For you I guarantee that, by the end/of the season, sympathy and tender care/will outreach judgment and critique." He ticks off a wish list fulfilled, concluding with "a sprig of sage-colored mistletoe/on the arc of the new bassinet." Moxley wakens, "delirious" with joy, and realizes it's all only a dream while she tiptoes over to the real tree in their living room, a withered spectacle.

For the past fifty years, confessional poetry has permitted us the luxury of oversharing—mostly about our sex lives and our parents—in a sentimental gesture ultimately meant to reconcile and heal. Free verse has been confessional poetry's de facto medium. A supple artifice in the hands of William Carlos Williams or Gregory Corso or Sylvia Plath, free verse has degenerated over the years into a style of no style, a sort of broken vernacular prose, as if language could be as transparent as a glass pane, the better to signal one's sincerity and truthfulness. The resulting poem substitutes personality for art, supposedly sounding "natural" or "speechlike."

The arc of Moxley's work—from *Often Capital*, written while she was in her early 20s, through *Imagination Verses*, *The Sense Record*, *The Line* and finally *Clampdown*—works heroically against the obstacle of "natural" voice. On a first reading, Moxley sounds utterly disconcerting, as if she were writing to you on the heels of a marathon session of retyping the poems of William Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy. From "The Yield":

> A thumb of silvery fur ensnared
> my visual stupor: it was a mouse
> scooting across the perilous ground
> that lay between the rustic lean-tos
> of brittle nut-brown maple leaves.
> Image-gripped, but how to name it,
> this will to live in little things?
> Upon such monumental nerve
> we build and break our wage.

Here, metrical regularity reinforces the artificiality of "ensnared my visual stupor" or "scooting across the perilous ground"; phrases echo nineteenth-century diction but are roiled by contemporary word choices ("scooting," "visual"). Moxley has always played contemporary off archaic diction to the hilt; *Imagination Verses* spliced girl-talk and Keats's dulcet lyricism to very sexy effect:

> Hey soldier, go flaunt your swags
> and jabots elsewhere
> this girl is bowing out, full to the
> glands with garlands
> and Democrats, the truthful and bad
> will eventually see my way.

With every book, Moxley experiments a little differently with the proportions of artificiality, archaism and slanginess. Her prosody continually evokes Hart Crane and Robert Creeley, two masters who combined courtly and sensual address with metrical austerity (Creeley is ostensibly a master of plain style, but his plain style masks its roots in English song). Moxley's indispensable *The Sense Record* luxuriates in a language descended from that shimmering line in Crane's "Voyages," "all the argosy of your bright hair." From the book's title poem:

> I was worn with the labor that
> augurs despair,
> life in the futile percentile, when
> past
> my squeamish eyelash, buffeted by
> scallops
> of small will, the slightest fairy
> brushed.
> My rubber soles conformed to the
> stones
> as I followed and spied the backyard
> starlet
> *allongée* on an orange blossom,
> delicate
> beside the drinking bees, blithe
> amidst
> sharp blades of grass, a rain-drop
> seductress
> entertaining ants on the folding lip
> of a pinkster leaf.

The net effect of Moxley's strange style has often been to foreground the sexiness of language and the poet, but their awkwardness too; it's a style that cultivates and explores the notion of wrong life. For to write in one's "natural" speaking voice already presupposes eloquence and fluency, and fluency presupposes ease. Moxley is definitely not at ease, either in her body or this country or century. She is in the wrong life, which cannot be written rightly. Thus she reconstructs another language—both yearning and alienated. In *Clampdown* it is a language in which she can confess her doubt and despair about the "chlorine rising up from the drains," the fluorescent bulbs, the nylon bedspreads of the middle-class bedroom, the fake plastic trees. Moxley's unmasking of American bounty as actual impoverishment thus has a lyric equivalent: the unmasking of the usual seductions and blandishments of the poem as an upmarket ad for metaphysical comforts. She strips away her privacy, bares her most vulnerable self, from the shabbiness of her home decor to the humiliations of a female who occasionally forgets—then remembers—her age. But unlike with confessional poets, Moxley's vulnerability stays vulnerable. In her poetry there is no narrative of healing or empowerment, just as there is no turning back time.

Moxley's relationship to poetry, and to other poets, is a recurring theme in her work; it stands in for an ethics or utopian politics where a coherent stance on world affairs might be impossible. Or, if not exactly impossible, then vulnerable to arguments, analysis and co-optation into a fruitless dialectic. She wants writing, and dreaming, to constitute utopian acts in themselves, but she's better at enacting this than arguing it, as in her poem "The Fountain":

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The public policing
of money and morals
destroys beauty
such as this—
for most of us
to "grow up"
means learning
to loathe what's cheap
and what's free,
when to value
the latter is
surely to be it.
The pleasure of
tonguing a pink-
lipped stranger
does not accrue,
it can be repeated
endlessly and yet
feel quite new.

The poem argues that casual sex epitomizes autonomy, but that we repress pleasures that render money, and accumulation, superfluous. (The inference is that poetry is devalued for the same reason.) These are partial truths at best, but couching them in a poem aching with nostalgia for free-ranging teenage lust and truancy is kind of obtuse, as if cruising were political action.

It's the way Moxley has fashioned herself, and her poetry, in relation to her readers and peers that constitutes her one clear political gesture. By publishing almost exclusively with very small, select presses and little magazines, she has drawn a tight circle of accessibility around herself, rejecting the realpolitik of po-biz. It seems she wouldn't be caught dead in the vicinity of Bread Loaf or in the pages of *American Poetry Review*. After all, what could be more alienating than "submission" to magazines, accumulation of rejection slips, the lottery of prizes and grants and residencies? Against unwarranted charges of elitism, she has written some sharp poems about her sense of vocation, including "The Best American Poetry" from her collection *The Sense Record*: "Nothing matters that is not made to matter," she asserts, and ends:

But we,
unlike the bird, need not, in the
ferment
of small objectives, desert material
purpose, we can direct the equitable
increments, though they provide no
guarantee
the outcome shall be just.

Moxley's insistence that we make our own meaning is borne out in offbeat and stubborn ways: some may be futile, but it's our

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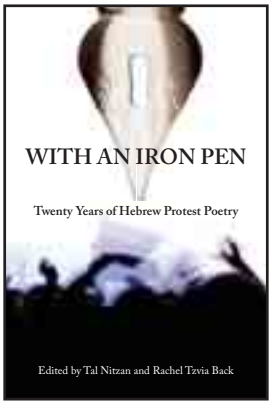

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only hope for autonomy, and for a space in which to make unorthodox poems and lead a "wrong life," with monumental nerve, in the eyes of the wider culture. We're humans, not birds. We're not chirping; our songs have content. What will that content be?

Moxley is no isolato, though. She was lucky to have had an education in how art-making is structured by ideological context and audience, early on, when she was a student at the University of California, San Diego, in the mid-'80s. Her teachers included Stephen Rodefer (who was once Charles Olson's student) and Rae Armantrout (once Denise Levertov's student). Moxley fell in with a group of friends who mutually reaffirmed one another's poetic vocations under the tutelage of the charismatic Rodefer; one of those friends became her life partner. The two moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where they received degrees at Brown University and were mentored by Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, whose Burning Deck Press has become an institution, keeping alive a European brand of twentieth-century literary experimentalism, publishing French and German poets alongside Harry Mathews and Marjorie Welish and Paul Auster. (Moxley has translated the contemporary French poet Jacqueline Risset for Burning Deck and Ugly Duckling Presse.) Moxley teaches at the University of Maine, home of the National Poetry Foundation, which has sustained the legacy of Black Mountain and Objectivist poets. (Moxley recounted her formative years in her memoir, *The Middle Room*, a 600-page tome; its mannered style and antique passions recall *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, the first volume of W.B. Yeats's *Autobiography*.)

This engagement with poetry as a metonym for utopian politics and longing—a vale of soulmaking in which social formations are as crucial as, say, first picking up Chapman's Homer—also provides Moxley with a unique kind of nightmare. In her book *The Line*, prose poems inflected with Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, she wrote apocalyptically, "I have deduced the advent of this shake-up by watching myself slowly abandon the things I once stood for and loved." The same fear of self-betrayal gives pathetic power to poems like "On the Face of It":

> in the moment when,
> body pavement bound,
> downed by a slight dizziness,
> disoriented, dignity lost,
> the world we assumed to rule
> suddenly changed and odd,
> we turn our eyes, our fearful eyes,
> like those of a displaced animal
> endangered by outdated instincts,
> and give ourselves over with
> gratitude
> to the care of anyone who's there.

Likewise, one's core self and ideals may suddenly be revealed as the ultimate in bad faith, as in "Our Defiant Motives":

> Are we ashamed of our own well-
> being?
> Does it admit of a terrible pact
> somewhere in our past?
> Let's not turn to face the wake, in
> which some may be
> drowning. Rather, let's redraw its
> rippling "V" to suit
> our need to feel that we are the ones
> who really suffered.
> We suffered the most. More than
> anyone else, for we
> understood their suffering, didn't
> we, and we
> were the ones who took it upon
> ourselves to make it new.

The terrible indictment she adds to Ezra Pound's poetic principle, "Make it new," collapses the work each generation does, whether in poetry or in government, into one Nietzschean—or, now, Darwinian—scumble. This horror bears the seed of an original insight. And this is important to remember because for some readers, *Clampdown* will come across as mordant and moralizing. Do we really spend our days staring disconsolately at our old bedspreads, wondering why we never became the next Rosa Luxemburg? This angst, which I can't quite take at face value, reminds me of a passage in critic George Scialabba's essay on Isaiah Berlin, who wrote of the "notoriously unsatisfactory, at times agonizing, position of the modern heirs of the liberal tradition." Scialabba responds: "This is a perfectly honorable position, but it is not, as far as I can see, an agonizing one. It seems, in fact, quite a comfortable one."

The dialectic of physical comfort and intellectual agonizing in Moxley's work does sometimes stall in a cul-de-sac, as in "The Occasion," one of the centerpieces of *Clampdown*. The poem dramatizes an afterparty for a revered poet (female, unnamed) visiting at the university where Moxley teaches. The Iraq War has begun, and visible from the host's window is an American flag hung on an immigrant neighbor's mobile home. An argument about the flag and the war slowly heats up; everyone is eventually hoist with her own petard of petty power relations and resentments. Interspersed with this scenario are quotations from Genesis 18, where God and Abraham spar over the fate of Sodom:

> And Abraham drew near, and said,
> Wilt thou also destroy the
> righteous with the wicked?
> Peradventure there be fifty
> righteous within the city: wilt
> thou also destroy and not spare
> the place for the fifty righteous
> that are therein?…
> And the LORD said, If I find in
> Sodom fifty righteous within the
> city, then I will spare all the place
> for their sakes.

Abraham keeps inquiring, reducing the number (forty-five? thirty? twenty? ten?), and the Lord keeps agreeing to spare the city for the sake of that many righteous. Why does Moxley make a device of Abraham's challenge to God? Is she praying that the righteous of the United States number enough to save us, only to discover their numbers continually reduced even in her own company of beloved poets? It's unclear. In a poem about failure—failure of nerve and failure of love—this may just be another episode in Moxley's ongoing exploration of kinds of valor in poetry. Valor often fails. The appropriation of that scary biblical injunction, though, begins to seem suspect if only because it invokes a question every poet eventually asks herself: "Would I continue to devote my life to poetry (and failure) for fifty readers?… How about ten?" This slippage from agony over the Other to agony over one's own irrelevance is a moral danger Moxley seems to recognize but not entirely elude.

And yet. Robert Duncan once said of his cohorts, "That I might 'like' or 'dislike' a poem of Zukofsky's or Charles Olson's means nothing where I turn to their work as evidence of the real. Movement and association here are not arbitrary, but arise as an inner need." So too with Moxley: never tinny, never trivial, her self-dramatizing has yielded poems that spill over with terror and bitterness, high lyricism and lust. (It's not French experimentalists she should be translating; it's *Antigone*.) That she sets her personal theater against the backdrop of the world stage may seem like a grandiose gesture, but it is a necessary one. The figure she cuts is as erect and austere as a gnomon; the shadow she casts will be long. ■

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Untitled [Man and Column], 1989, a mixed-media collage by Keith Waldrop included in his book *Several Gravities* (2009)

No Ideas but in Crowds

by JOSHUA CLOVER

Paris Spleen
Little Poems in Prose.
Charles Baudelaire.
Translated by Keith Waldrop.
Wesleyan. 99 pp. $22.95.

"I want to write the moral history of the men of my generation—or, more accurately, the history of their feelings." So wrote Gustave Flaubert about his novel *Sentimental Education*, which concerns the years 1840–67. As it happens, this period spans Charles Baudelaire's life as an artist, from the publication of his first poem in *Le Corsaire* to his death in 1867 at 46. But it is not simply a coincidence of years that is signal here. Consider Flaubert's smooth and instantaneous leap from "moral history" into "feelings." This elision offers an unintended but eloquent verdict on what is great and strange about Baudelaire's poetry: its unmatched capacity to transmute public existence into private torments and then return them to the public sphere, through the symbolic medium of his famed "correspondences." Had Baudelaire not existed, Flaubert might have had to invent him.

The generation in question is the workshop wherein modernity was assembled, Baudelaire its glowering emissary. This is true, in part, for his ambiguous participation in the century's central political episode, from the February Revolution of 1848 to Louis Bonaparte's 1851 coup d'état. As the winds turn from tragic to farcical, the poet is the weather vane of the century of revolutions—switching from the Republican barricades to the side of reaction in a single gust. If Baudelaire is a missing character in *Sentimental Education*, he is equally an absent presence in the other great moral history of midcentury France, Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Even as he haunts the margins of these master texts, Baudelaire promenades center stage in others, and writes his own. He would take the role as advance man for the modern era even if some of its most powerful thinkers had not explicitly made the case on his behalf. These include Jean-Paul Sartre's bravura psychoanalytic study and Walter Benjamin's two epic essays, recently repackaged by Harvard University Press under the decisive title *The Writer of Modern Life*.

But a surprise awaits those who, knowing the book was condemned instantly on its 1857 publication, open Baudelaire's canonical *The Flowers of Evil* expecting the scandalous shock of the new. That book is largely composed in traditional style, its rhythms stiff and regular, its rhymes rich and repetitive.

Joshua Clover is the author of several books of poetry and criticism, including the forthcoming meditation on the politics of pop at the end of the cold war, 1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About *(California)*.

WHAT ARE INTELLECTUALS GOOD FOR?

Essays & Reviews by
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The poem most explicitly about the matter of modernity, "The Swan," proceeds in strict alexandrines, the twelve-syllable lines that had held sway in French poetry since the seventeenth century:

> Paris change! mais rien dans ma
> mélancolie
> N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages,
> blocs,
> Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi
> devient allégorie
> Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus
> lourds que des rocs.
>
> Paris changes! But nothing in my
> melancholy
> Has moved! New mansions,
> scaffoldings, city blocks,
> Old outskirts, all for me turn to
> allegory
> And my dear memories are heavier
> than rocks.

English can scarcely capture the formal feeling, though generations of translators have tried; at the same time, no one misses the cry for, and against, the sudden remaking of the material world. This mismatch is unsettling but critical. It expresses the social antagonisms of the age more than any well-harmonized verse: on the one hand, the waning but inescapable power of the aristocracy, observing the old forms behind the stolid facades of western Paris. On the other, the mercurial bustle of the marketplace, that perpetual parade with its confetti made from a million receipts. By the end of the nineteenth century this confrontation has largely been settled; in *The Flowers of Evil* it is a mythic drama, voluptuary and awful, one way of life arriving as another passes away.

This is the book that Keith Waldrop translated three years ago. Waldrop has translated some of the lions of recent French poetry, including Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud and Jacques Roubaud, in addition to Edmond Jabès. At Brown University, Waldrop has worked with an extraordinary and seemingly endless stream of exciting young poets. He edits the press Burning Deck with his wife, the invaluable poet, teacher and translator Rosmarie Waldrop. But in the main he is a poet, with more than a dozen titles to his credit, including the estimable new selection *Transcendental Studies*. In translating *The Flowers of Evil*, Waldrop made a poet's choice.

This choice was to modulate that book's now mannered-sounding French by rendering it into versets: each stanza captured as a burst of poetic prose. It was an intransigent decision, almost as curious as the original's arch archaism, but curiously effective because of this. In adding another degree of parallax to the poetics, it reanimates the original's discomfiting misalignment.

One must now also suspect Waldrop was playing the long game. The verset form, it turns out, is ideally suited for his new translation of Baudelaire's posthumously assembled (and titled) collection, *Paris Spleen*. The fifty surviving pieces are, as Baudelaire at one point called the incomplete sheaf, "Little Poems in Prose" (Waldrop has dropped the verse "Epilogue" sometimes appended to the collection). They were not the first prose poems; as Baudelaire concedes in the volume's dedicatory letter "For Arsène Houssaye," Aloysius Bertrand pioneered the form in French. But it was surely Baudelaire, less famous than infamous by the 1869 publication of *Spleen*, who brought the style to the broader republic of poetry. Rimbaud's two celebrated prose series, *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*, followed within five years; the form has persevered since then and gained increasing purchase on these shores. As Waldrop notes in the wryly instructive Translator's Introduction, "American poets, in recent years, seem to have gotten the idea."

But what is the idea, aside from a form that wasn't popular and then was? Waldrop's account, admirable for its straightforward clarity and command of the tradition, largely concerns aesthetic genealogies, both of French poetry and of Baudelaire; it rests on the appeal of variation, of expanding the palette, perhaps cocking a snoot at tradition along the way. Some readers may find this leaves open the question, Why just then? That is to say, what is the form's history—the situation for which the prose poem offered a language where none had existed before, and thus took hold?

Baudelaire names this himself, in a passage of such inarguable clarity that it has become an axiom of modern art: "Which of us has not, in his ambitious days, dreamt the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, the flip-flops of consciousness." He continues:

> Above all, it's from being in crowded towns, from the criss-cross of their innumerable ways, that this obsessive ideal is born.

The argument is as simple as it is radical. The city is not a thing, not even a stage (as it appears in lesser accounts of Baudelaire and of modernity in general). It is a set of relations, shifting and elusive but for all that the base circumstance from which others arise, including objects, events, people. It is a bit like saying that the solar system isn't made of planets but of gravity—a gravity that is modifiable, historically specific and can reveal itself only through moments and instants. Thoughts, politics, poetry might rail against this situation, but this cannot gainsay the fact that they arise from it as well.

This gets at the contradiction that charges *Paris Spleen*, distinct from the *The Flowers of Evil*'s formal antagonisms. The individual is endlessly threatened by the gravity of the social whorl, by the maw of the masses and the tinsel seductions of the marketplace. And yet he is an individual only insofar as he is part of this new configuration, the very grounds for this new sort of person. He has no being beyond it. "A room resembling a reverie," Baudelaire begins the poem "Double Bedroom"—but it is not a reverie into which he can fall. He cannot resist the awful lure of the street, with its "chaos of mud and snow, criss-crossed by a thousand carriages, sparkling with toys and toffee, crawling with greed and despair, standard delirium of a metropolis, made to disturb the brain of the sturdiest solitary." One exists only in the darkly shining parade within which one disappears. *No ideas but in crowds*—this is the book's axiom.

Even the allegories and parables that occupy much of the collection's latter portion must bend themselves to this new scenario: the demiurges and demons, moons that speak and the Dionysian staff of the thyrsus. These figures don't open a channel to some universal story but exactly the reverse; they underscore the breaking of tradition. Like the angel of "Lost Halo," they are debauched in an instant. The modern seduces effortlessly, and its promises are not mistaken.

This ambivalent motion cannot come to rest. Again and again the poet struggles to step outside: "Finally! Alone!" he cries out in "One A.M." "Finally! the tyranny of the human face has disappeared and from now on my sufferings will be my own." At one point he reaches back to *The Flowers of Evil* for a dream of escape, repeating a title from that volume: "Invitation to the Voyage." The earlier version is a triple sonnet of sensual longing, a last vestige of aristocratic ease that still might endure somewhere. Returning here as a prose block, the similar language seems out of place, a vitriolic travesty: "A true land of milk and honey, where all is beautiful, opulent, tranquil, honest; where

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luxury prides its orderliness; where life is rich, easy-going, altogether excluding disorder, turbulence, the unforeseen."

If such a scenario was once a hopeless hope, now it is pure inversion, a way to name the latest "true land" in negative. "In that atmosphere we could build the good life—there where slower time yields more thought," he says. We don't believe him for an instant. His thought is timed to the vexed and anxious urban drift, even if—especially if—he can never be at home in it. There is no meditative, calm Baudelaire who would be believable; here, after all, is the poet whose bravura opening bid in "The Eyes of the Poor" is, "Ah, so you'd like to know why, today, I hate you."

For all his hate, it is the mass of people, each more unfortunate than the last, to whom he keeps returning. In "Solitude," perhaps the book's most paradoxical poem, he seems to renounce any rapprochement with the crowd. "The unfortunate inability to be alone," he bemoans, and "practically all our mishaps come from not staying in our room"—summoning the exhausted wisdom of La Bruyère and Pascal. By the end he has in his sights "all the fools searching for happiness in movement and in a prostitution I would call *fraternalistic*, if I wanted to speak in my century's uppity tone."

These last two words are an unconventional translation of "*belle langue*" (poetry's virtue is that it is both necessary and pleasurable to linger over the phrase, the word). The common phrasing has long been "the beautiful language of my century"—this provides the title for a recent scholarly book by Tom McDonough about the emergence of *détournement* in postwar France as well as the last words of Guy Debord's *Mémoires*. Waldrop's willingness to alienate the language, to make it dance again, cannot help but be striking to any reader of Baudelaire. It now suggests something of the poet's contempt for the honeyed talk of the bourgeoisie and its new cadre of captive intellectuals, and Waldrop gets this exactly right.

What slips away in this rendering, however, is the extent to which Baudelaire did wish to speak the beautiful language of his century, to wrest it from the salon and the *Académie*. Again and again he goes looking for it; the secret he knows is that it is to be found exactly "in movement and in a prostitution." This passage is the stroll of the *flâneur*, that jaundiced inspector of modernity, walking through the market but imagining himself not quite of it: the private citizen invented by public existence. This is the daily or nightly course for which *Paris Spleen*'s lyrical movements and undulations find form.

"The interior is passing away. Life turns back to become public," wrote the Goncourt brothers, incomparable chroniclers of Paris, in 1860. This is incontestable. Baudelaire's grasp is nonetheless subtler, more dialectically refined: the interior will now be itself a public fact. Otherwise it is finally unsatisfactory, intolerable. Thus his greatest poem, "The Crowd": "It is not given to everyone to blend into the multitude: enjoying the crowd is an art." Granted, it is an art that will require "a taste for travesty and masque, along with hatred of home and passion for travel." Here he does not mean the escape fantasy of "Invitation." Rather, it is the tormented excursion into modernity.

And it is in this admission of necessity that he is able to uncover the secret of the situation, the contradiction at the heart of things: "Who walks alone with his thoughts draws a singular intoxication from this universal communion." This is Baudelaire at the limit, having uncovered a new feeling that does indeed appear as a moral history, the private life of the public turn. ■

ABIGAIL M. SCHILLING

The flagship store of Cody's Books on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, California, July 7, 2006

The Long Goodbye?

by ELISABETH SIFTON

Humanity has read, hoarded, discarded and demanded books for centuries; for centuries books have been intimately woven into our sense of ourselves, into the means by which we find out who we are and who we want to be. They have never been mere physical objects—paper pages of a certain size and weight printed with text and sometimes images, bound together on the left—never just cherished or reviled reminders of schoolday torments, or mementos treasured as expressions of bourgeois achievement, or icons of aristocratic culture. They have been all these things and more. They have been instruments of enlightenment.

Once the invention of movable type and various commercial advances in the early modern era enabled printers to sell books to anyone who could and would pay for them (no longer reserving them for priests and kings), they became irresistibly popular: their relatively sturdy bindings gave them some permanence; the small-format ones were portable and could be read anywhere; and they transmitted sensory pleasures to eye, hand and brain. Children learned to read with them; adolescents used them, sometimes furtively, to discover the secrets of grown-up life; adults loved them for the pleasure, learning and joy they conveyed. Books have had a kind of spooky power, embedded as they are in the very structures of learning, commerce and culture by which we have absorbed, stored and transmitted information, opinion, art and wisdom. No wonder, then, that the book business, although a very small part of the American economy, has attracted disproportionate attention.

Elisabeth Sifton is the author of The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War.

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But does it still merit this attention? Do books still have their power? Over the past twenty years, as we've thrown ourselves eagerly into a joy ride on the Information Superhighway, we've been learning to read, and been reading, differently; and books aren't necessarily where we start or end our education. The unprofitable chaos of the book business today indicates, among other things, that slow, almost invisible transformations as well as rapid helter-skelter ones have wrecked old reading habits (bad and good) and created new ones (ditto). In the cacophony of modern American commerce, we hear incoherent squeals of dying lifeforms along with the triumphant braying and twittering of new human expression.

People in the book business, like the readers they seek out (a minute fraction of the literate population), hate to think that books might be moribund, and signs of vigorous life in some quarters belie the grim 2009 forecasts. Also, publishers have always mournfully predicted that the end was nigh—they must share either a melancholy temperament or sensitivity to the fragility of culture—so today's dire predictions aren't in themselves news. (I'm speaking here not of technical books or textbooks, which are facing their own crises, but of what are called general trade books—literature, politics, history, biography and memoir, science, poetry, art—written for the general public.) When I first got a publishing job almost half a century ago, my elders and betters in the trade regularly worried about The Future of Books, even though manuscripts continued to pour onto our desks. They worried, too, when firms changed ownership. The eponymous boss of the house where I first typed rejection letters and checked proofs sold his company to Encyclopedia Britannica in 1966; The Viking Press, which I joined in 1968, was sold by Thomas Guinzburg, son of its founder, to Pearson in 1975 and went through many permutations of a merger with Penguin Books, also owned by Pearson; Alfred A. Knopf, where I worked from 1987 to 1992, was a jewel of a firm that in 1960 had become a *dépendance* of Random House, in turn owned by RCA, then sold to the Newhouse brothers in 1980 and sold by them to Bertelsmann in 1998; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, which I joined in 1993, lost some of its independence when Roger Straus sold the company to Holtzbrinck in 1994, and more after his death in 2004.

All told, I've worked in only four firms, yet for seven different owners and in eight or nine different publishing arrangements designed and redesigned to accommodate varying corporate intentions. I have seen up close how feckless management activity can change things. Of course, now we all are acquainted with truly vast corporate fecklessness, which has brought us a world-historical economic meltdown that dwarfs everything. For publishers, it comes on top of systemic difficulties they have long struggled to resolve, mitigate or ignore—difficulties only compounded by changes that the digital realm has been making in our reading culture.

As we know, all retail businesses collapsed in September, failed to recover during the Christmas season and have been weak ever since. Book sales continued to drop in the spring, but then, they've been stagnant for years. It was in 2001, when the dot-com bubble was beginning to burst but before the shock of 9/11, that I first heard a morose sales director use the catchphrase "flat is the new up." Book publishers and sellers were overextended and had grown careless, like everyone else, in the go-go years, while the digital reading revolution continued and business worsened. In the past six months, layoffs and shutterings have become commonplace.

Exorbitance in the book sector has been weakening our culture for decades.

A key element in the dissemination of books, independent of publishers and booksellers but essential to both, is the press. The simultaneous collapse of the business model for newspapers and magazines is a gruesome fact of life, and we book people keenly feel the pain of a sister print-on-paper industry, to put it mildly. All citizens should be alarmed by the loss of such a vital necessity to a democracy. But the hard numbers and socioeconomic exigencies of journalism's huge crisis differ greatly from those of book publishing's smaller one (though they are often conflated). Here I want only to stress that the loss of so many book-review pages nationwide is crippling all aspects of our literary life. And I mean all. Book news and criticism were fundamental to the old model of book publishing and to the education of writers; Internet coverage of books, much of it witty and interesting, does not begin to compensate for their loss.

It is taking time for the obsolescence and decay in the book world to show, given the energy and talent of so many writers, their continued devotion to book genres, the resourceful bravery of some publishers, the continuing plausibility of many aspects of their business, the pleasure and profit taken in reinforcing familiar reading habits and the astonishing biodiversity of book publishing. Not to mention the usual quotient of laziness. European publishers are happy right now because things seemed to go well at the winter book fairs in Leipzig and Paris; the London Book Fair, in April, was hopeful if meager, with strenuous, incoherent efforts made to engage with the digitized word. In America, pubescent vampire novels are selling like crazy to readers of all ages, also memoirs about cats and puppies; classics are still in demand, as are cookbooks about cupcakes, of which there are an amazing number. Books by brand-name writers continue to populate the bestseller lists (though not racking up the numbers they used to). Every week the trade bulletins report hundreds of new books being signed up, sometimes for absurd amounts of money, by dozens of publishers.

Self-indulgent excess doesn't go away, then. This exorbitance in the book sector, as in the gigantic financial and housing sectors, has been weakening our culture for decades. Hubristic, ill-considered follies reached notable highs under the Great Deregulator, President Reagan, but to be fair, book publishers then (many still carrying the names of the confident men who had founded them twenty-five, fifty, 100 or 150 years before) were panicking, for they were losing their once dependable base, and Reagan made things worse by cutting federal funding for libraries and other appropriations that had helped to fuel America's postwar advances in literacy and book-based education. Americans were fleeing both small rural towns, with their once respected libraries, and big cities, with their many bookstores stocking a full range of titles; they were heading for suburbs and exurbs where bookshops were few and scattered customers hard to reach. We haven't recovered from this, though we've finally realized the dark consequences of our hectic expansion into socially vacuous space—much of it now underwater, as we've learned to say.

Simultaneously, Wall Street and Big Media—RCA, Gulf & Western, Bertelsmann, Pearson, Maxwell, Newhouse, Murdoch—moved in on the beleaguered publishers. The dismal consequences of this infamous development are often be-

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wailed, but we ought to be clear about the characteristics of book publishing that were supposed to survive this assault and maybe could have. The idea had been to produce and distribute profitably as many books as a company's staff could prepare for publication in a given season, keeping a well-trained eye on paper, printing and binding costs, using skill, nerve and detailed local knowledge about the likely readership to arrive at what one hoped was the right print run, price and release date. One could never be sure if you'd gotten these last three right, but at least the trade developed means either to scupper overstock or reprint quickly books that were selling faster than expected; as to price and release date, you did the best you could and held your breath. One mark of a publisher's quality was how well he made these guesses.

But the chief marks were in the choices he made among the materials submitted to his company; the editorial and advocacy work his staff did on behalf of the nascent books, building an audience for them, preparing the ground; the copy-editing, proofreading and legal checks; the typographical designs devised and manufacturing quality achieved; the efforts made to get attention paid to, and sales consummated of, books that might otherwise go unnoticed in the noisy, trivializing, inattentive world where readers live. For centuries, these activities were the publisher's principal raisons d'être, and they affected the substance, size, even quality and intention of tens of thousands of books big and small, the work of writers talented and untalented, now famous and now forgotten.

Publishers and writers have for centuries conspired and fought over words, sentences, chapters, fonts, illustrations, paper, trim size, binding materials, jacket design. Publishing decisions made distinctive differences to literature in every century. A publishing rationale lay behind Descartes's wish that *Discours de la méthode* have an unusually small format. The publisher of *The Charterhouse of Parma* wanted to issue it quickly and needed it shorter; Stendhal concurred—hence the rushed compression of its ending (a flaw the consummate professional Balzac noticed). G.B. Shaw insisted on a specific typeface ("I'll stick with Caslon until I die," he said, Caslon being the font Ben Franklin also used for setting the Declaration of Independence); Edmund Wilson on an unusual trim size; John Updike on all physical aspects of his books. If you speak of the death of books, you are speaking of the extinction of this shared culture of choice, correction, revision and presentation, along with its craft skills. If you talk of the future of books, you must somehow anticipate how it might continue.

As the megapublishers tightened their grip in the 1980s, I was dismayed to see a number of once good firms of markedly different publishing style or literary taste make foolish, overpriced mistakes; they seemed to be losing their bearings as they paid ever more money for ever more questionable properties, entrusting the sewing up of these sow's ears to not very experienced practitioners. I asked Jeremiah Kaplan, founder of the Free Press, a once autonomous and brilliant publisher of serious social science, how things could go so wrong. Besides the obvious motive of greed, he thought it simple. "Businessmen never learn from their mistakes because they always find someone else to blame for them," he said. "Businessmen only learn from their successes. Except publishers can't do that." He smiled. We both knew well that you couldn't foreordain a bestseller, no matter how wisely you handled every detail. And the necessary skills were disappearing. "Since our successes can't be replicated, publishers learn nothing! Nothing!" Roger Straus, too, a skillful practitioner if ever there was one, understood the chanciness: "Aw, a blind pig can find a truffle," he'd say, deflecting praise for publishing a good book well. Yes, a lot of it *was* blind luck.

The death of books would mean the extinction of a shared culture of correction and presentation.

Publishers used to presume that money earned on successful titles would help pay the bills incurred in producing and marketing books that sold less well but that they supported for reasons of cultural pride, literary respect, political conviction, competitive zeal or quirky enthusiasm. And they depended on what had been an extensive network of independent booksellers who also cared about these works, carrying the "frontlist" of new titles and goodly portions of the "backlist," books from years earlier that continued to attract readers, albeit in smaller numbers (this "long tail" was the book trade's most profitable sector). America's best independent bookshops—those founded in the 1970s, like Powell's, in Portland, Oregon; Tattered Cover, in Denver; Square Books, in Oxford, Mississippi; Brazos Bookstore, in Houston; Elliott Bay Books, in Seattle; and older landmark ones—prospered because they stocked their copious shelves with backlist titles for students, browsers and enthusiasts, and tailored their frontlist choices to their customers' tastes, interests, even anxieties. (And they didn't condescend. I've encountered condescension in the book trade only among schlock purveyors, who like to emphasize how low their customers' tastes are, how limited their curiosity.) Writers took this infrastructure for granted, if they thought about it at all. That bookselling and publishing were small operations, as American businesses go, suited the shared enterprise; word of books spread virally from one locale to the next, one reading group to the next, one conversation to another among editors, sales reps, booksellers, customers—all of them benefiting from local or national reviews, well-publicized author appearances and lots of *reading*.

Reading books and haggling over them. David Schwartz, the late director of a fine Milwaukee bookstore that his father, Harry W. Schwartz, founded in 1927—David died in 2004, and the company closed this spring—showed me a passage in his old man's memoir about a moment during the Great Depression when Mr. Schwartz begged Alfred Knopf to extend him just a bit more credit so that he might put in orders for the Knopf fall list, selections that no self-respecting bookseller could be without. Mr. Knopf refused. Understandably. Then as now, bookshops paid their bills within ninety to 120 days, while printers, compositors and paper mills demanded payment in twenty-eight days, putting publishers in an eternal squeeze; printers thus became virtual bankers for the business. (It was because a printer in 1938 refused further credit to the great publisher Pascal Covici that he had to close shop and take the proofs of Steinbeck's *The Long Valley* and the manuscript of *The Grapes of Wrath* to The Viking Press, which published both within a year.) This only proved, wrote Mr. Schwartz about the implacable Mr. Knopf, himself pursued by creditors, that "it is possible to have a heart of stone and an excellent taste for literature at the same time."

Knopf and his competitors made their remorseless calculations in order to keep their enterprises afloat during those bad years. Indeed it's only recently that publish-

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ers have reconsidered the formulas worked out then for budgeting, pricing and discounting books. You'd think that paper or printing costs might not represent the same fractions of a book's cover price as they did in 1939, say. And what about composition costs, now that authors submit their work in computer files, eliminating the need for typesetting? (When this issue first arose, publishers refused to acknowledge that the writers were defraying a good part of the manufacturing costs, declined to raise their royalty percentages and claimed instead that a due increase in income would arrive thanks to more sales resulting from lower cover prices. The arithmetic remained unchanged—even though the clueless MBAs who swarmed into the business in the 1990s might have spiffed things up. Of the roughly $10 a publisher took in on a $20 book, say, 10 to 15 percent of the cover price was allocated to the author, leaving only the remaining $7.50 or so to cover the fixed, make-ready costs (coding, proofing and correcting the author's original disk, press preparation and such); the varying paper, printing and binding costs; the cost of sales and marketing; the overhead; and maybe some profit, 4 to 5 percent if all went well. No wonder they longed for bestsellers, the income from which would allow expansion of staff, or staff salaries, or the size of the list—or profits.

Along with old-time skills, trade publishers have risked losing their nerve and cultural daring.

Along with old-time skills, the trade publishers risked losing their nerve and cultural daring. This is a well-known sad story. The money men trusted editors less and marketing people more; literary experiment was frowned on, though gambling on popular authors was acceptable—and they all bid to publish the same ones. They became more and more alike, competing to overpay for the same celebrities. Mercifully this was not uniformly true throughout the business. Small presses and still-independent houses with unimpeachable professional standards continued their exploratory, lively work, and university presses continued, even increased, their commitment to innovative books in the sciences and humanities; they became home to scholars who decades earlier would have been "discovered" by a Harper, Knopf or Macmillan—as William James, Keynes, Veblen, Gould, Arendt, Schlesinger, Hofstadter, Foucault and countless others had been. Today the trade houses may grab already world-famous professors or ambitious younger professors whom agents press on them, but they rarely find eggheads on their own.

The corporations that consolidated the publishing houses, like the Silicon Valley children of today, saw book copyrights as valuable "content" with plenty of cultural cachet that could be "synergistically" exploited—optimally by the other arms of their media empires. The publishers didn't mind this, since they had long depended on the sale not just of original editions but of subsidiary rights—mass-market paperback and book-club editions; foreign, film and TV rights; magazine or newspaper serialization. The new corporate arrangements seemed likely to augment these juicy opportunities. That the money men found publishing's profit margins absurdly narrow and insisted on at least a 15 percent return on their investment seemed harsh but practicable. That they had no confidence in books per se and knew nothing about writers or readers seemed a neutral factor, not the harshly negative one it actually is. As any sensible businessperson knows, you can't make money in a low-profit operation unless you stay close to your sources of supply and demand—writers and readers in this case. And it helps your profit margin to love or at least respect them.

Another unacknowledged danger was the new twist given to familiar vulgarity. We knew about opportunistic books by or about politicians and celebrities—these had been hardy perennials for centuries. We knew about movie and television tie-in sales (they started in the 1930s and '60s, respectively, with Steinbeck and Galsworthy, for example); tens of thousands of new readers devoured the novels on which big- and small-screen hits were based. This wasn't high or low business, just good-sense middle. But by the 1990s, with the people in charge taking their cues from Hollywood and worshiping at the altar of television and the Internet, a tipping point was reached and passed: many bestsellers were now going in the opposite direction. More and more derivative pseudobooks were spun off from the Internet or TV, booklike objects created by the teams working for, say, famous generals in televised wars, cooks, telly dons, ballplayers, reality-show contestants, famous pets. These flashy items dominate shelf space, ad budgets and public attention; they leave nowhere near enough air, space or money for true literature. The late Robert Giroux used to say dismissively of such volumes that they were "almost books; let's call them 'ooks," but like invasive shrubs in a once well-maintained garden, they are choking off the life-support systems for vital literature.

The stifling excess of lucrative junk is, naturally, galling for literary artists unknown or only slightly known to the mass market, whose talents are perhaps not suited to it; they want or need the filthy lucre too. Their ever more powerful agents have successfully decoupled the size of the royalty advances they receive from any estimate of the books' eventual earnings, and routinely assure them that if Knopf or Norton or Morrow fails to earn back the upfront money, it's because their masterpieces were badly published, not because the advances were implausibly high. This is cheering, of course; writers' egos are always shaky, and they tend to forget the sage warning that you should disregard compliments extended by someone whose income derives from your own. Also, they won't acknowledge that literary quality may decline as advances increase; only rarely is a writer liberated into confidence-inspiring freedom by following advice from greedy publishers about Pleasing the Crowd. Willa Cather wasn't the only fine writer who refused advances for being, in her view, unethical, nor was D.H. Lawrence the only one who found them demeaning. The agents have much to answer for.

What now? Publishers are battening down, and chain stores are struggling, having staked so much on nationally merchandised dreck, having committed themselves to imitating the look of the big indies but never quite matching their tighter local focus and skill in "hand selling" genuine books to readers. Anyway, the entire world of American retail business is veering toward obsolescence. Must books now find their way in cyberspace?

This prospect is even more alarming than the crisis threatening brick-and-mortar stores, for the World Wide Web is an ocean with few buoys to mark navigable channels of meaning. The channels we navigate on it are *mercantile* channels, designed to be *lucrative*—but not for us. The omnipresent money-grubbing—far removed from the pure,

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open-access Eden that the Internet's founders claimed they wanted—may seem natural to Americans used to wearing corporate names on their clothing and seeing their public spaces defaced with company logos and ad slogans, but the habitat is unnatural for the true life of the mind, politics or art. In this dystopia, one can scarcely get attention paid to new books except those that fit in with the flora and fauna already found there. True, you can easily reach niche audiences and specialty communities for your oh-so-unique book, but what of the general culture? How is your book being read? And in what manner might you try—say, ten years from now—to write something new? How will you know if it's any good? How will it become known? Will it be a book?

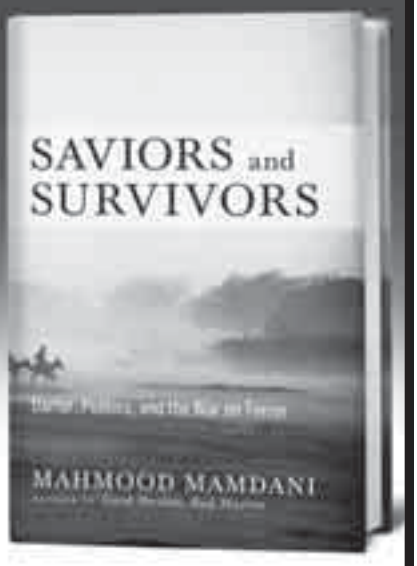
Like everyone else, I couldn't be more grateful for the stupendous riches that great search engines find for me on the web. Like everyone else, I'm now accustomed to the speed and ease with which I can locate "content." No argument there. But my reading on the web is of a completely different order from my reading of or in a book, and it would be even more so if I hadn't already put in decades of bookish exertion. If I'd done my schoolwork on a computer, if I'd grown up text-messaging and Twittering, I'd not only listen and read differently, but I'd think and express myself differently. It's no surprise that teachers and writing instructors report big changes in their students' habits of attention and modes of expression. No surprise. We've always known that technologies new and old affect our inner imaginative understanding of the world. This is why we must still ask, of the possibilities that "books" could be offered in other formats or sold in new ways (once we've developed reliable income streams from writing and selling them), what kind of imaginative energy, what kind of reading—or readers—will Scribd, Kindle, Sony Reader or other electronic devices attract in the years to come? And what kind of writing?

It's a colossal irony to have the guys and gals of Amazon, Google and their ilk lusting for free book "content" as premium material on which to stake their enlarged claims to commercial riches. For these clever mathematicians and engineers who are shaping the electronic business of our time and the archives of the future, these baby-faced young entrepreneurs, have risen to their mercantile eminence without encountering books, and don't think they need to. I enjoyed the fatuous surprise of Google's Sergey Brin discovering that "There is fantastic information in books. Often when I do a search, what is in a book is miles ahead of what I find on a Web site." Translating this backhanded recognition of value into his own debased lingo, he understands that books make for "viable information-retrieval systems," information being the only cultural signifier he recognizes, evidently. His company's amazing presumption that book people should simply hand over the keys to their priceless kingdom shows how completely he and his colleagues misunderstand what is at stake.

But these Internet people don't care. For billionaires like Brin, accessing the giant river of infinite book "content" onto which they can glue paid advertising is simply a giant new way to make more money, and they are single-minded about that. The giveaway is not only in their ignorance but in their reluctance to share the wealth. For its Look Inside program, Amazon demands that publishers give it, gratis, electronic files of the books, along with blurbs and cover art, arguing that in return the publishers will have increased sales. How might you prove or disprove that? (Publishers might recognize Amazon's argument, since it resembles the pathetically phony one about composition costs that they themselves used against writers years ago.) The (not yet settled) settlement between Google Book Search and the publishers who sued it for copyright infringement proposes to give a breathtakingly audacious near-monopoly to Google and mingy terms to writers. We publishers seem to have forgotten that Google's and Amazon's profit margins are triple or quintuple ours, and we haven't always checked our contracts with the authors.

It is a confused, confusing and very fluid situation, and no one can predict how books and readers will survive. Changed reading habits have already transformed and diminished them both. I, for one, don't trust the book trade to see us through this. Wariness is in order. Three centuries ago, John Locke agreed that we shouldn't base our freedom to read books on the proclaimed good offices of the business itself. "Books seem to me to be pestilent things," he wrote in 1704, "and infect all that trade in them… with something very perverse and brutal. Printers, binders, sellers, and others that make a trade and gain out of them have universally so odd a turn and corruption of mind, that they have a way of dealing peculiar to themselves, and not conformed to the good of society, and that general fairness that cements mankind." ■

Mahmood Mamdani
on Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror



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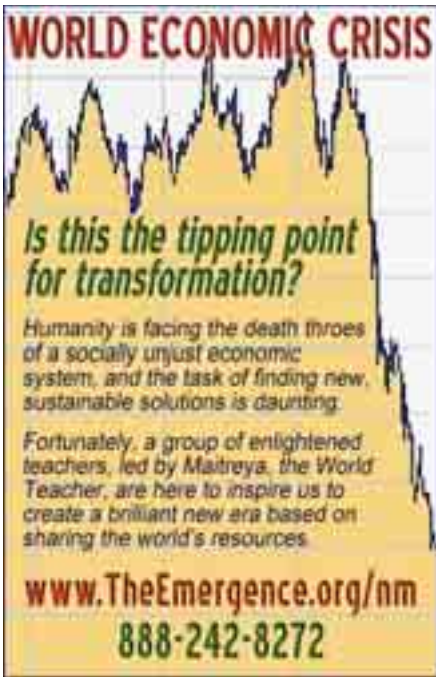
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Exchange

(continued from page 2)

endlessly adjudicating prose: it reminds them of what they are most in fear of losing. Seen in this light, he hardly qualifies as the enemy Deresiewicz is bent on shooting down. To the contrary: he is one of our own, struggling to deliver a message, perhaps to the wrong base but still to a base on our side of the divide.

Vivian Gornick

Deresiewicz Replies

Portland, Ore.

Vivian Gornick agrees with every point I make about James Wood; she just doesn't want me making them in public. She wants to see a revival of literary culture, but not at the cost of actually having a literary culture.

I did not charge Wood with being an unhappily lapsed Christian who looks to literature for moral accountability; I charged him with being a proud apostate who looks to literature for metaphysical certainty. Wood's problem is precisely that he has no interest in the way literature bears on moral questions—that is, on personal or social or political ones. He isn't as much of a "sermonizer" as Trilling; he isn't a sermonizer at all. But of course, Trilling wasn't a sermonizer either. He didn't affirm the middlebrow convictions of his time; he exposed them to relentless scrutiny by uncovering the ways that literature called them into question. He probably would have greeted Gornick's talk of "the penetrating psychological truths behind modernist despair" as an example of what he called "the modern self-consciousness and the modern self-pity."

But why are we even talking about Trilling? I named five of the New York critics and gave him no more space than most of the others. Trilling, however, has long since been reduced to a toy soldier in the culture wars, the last of the Dead White Men. No wonder it is so difficult to find an intelligent appraisal of his work, let alone an honest one (Stefan Collini's December 8 piece in this magazine being a rare exception).

I did not acknowledge Wood's passion as a critic: I announced it, I celebrated it, I trumpeted it. I spent three paragraphs near the start of my review extolling his virtues, and I reaffirmed them in the very last sentence. In fact, I seem to have a much higher opinion of his work than does Gornick, who values it only for its passion. But passion alone is not enough to justify Wood's criticism, or anyone else's. The ideas that travel on the winds of that passion matter as well. Yet Gornick believes that we "do not need to engage with what [Wood] is actually saying." Don't need to engage with what he is actually saying! What a brave conception of intellectual discourse. But that, apparently, is my sin: that I take Wood seriously enough to criticize him—precisely what Gornick admires in Wood's treatment of literature itself. His passion is good. My passion is bad. My passion means that I am treating Wood like an "enemy" whom I am "bent on shooting down." (If you really want to see a critic "on the warpath," read Gornick's essay on Saul Bellow and Philip Roth in the September 2008 issue of *Harper's*.)

For Gornick, cultural life is a kind of political struggle, complete with "sides" and "enemies" and "bases" to whom the right "message" must be "delivered." We must show solidarity at all cost, even if it means betraying every one of our principles. Taking another critic to task is akin to attacking a fellow Democrat, and Wood becomes the Joe Lieberman of the Reading Party, someone we are obliged to embrace simply because he caucuses on our side of the aisle, even though we don't agree with a single thing he says. But culture isn't about being on the right team, or any team. There is no "us." With a remarkable lack of self-consciousness, Gornick employs the very rhetorical device for which Trilling was most consistently criticized, the use of the first-person plural. Yet when Trilling spoke of what "we" believe or do, he used it as a form of collective self-criticism: "we" the self-flattering liberal middle class. Gornick uses it, instead, as a form of self-flattery: "our own," "our side"—the blessed "us," heroically holding the bridge against the barbaric "them."

Nothing will enfeeble a literary culture more effectively than this kind of tribalism. You don't protect criticism (or art) by not criticizing it; you kill it. Culture isn't a tea party, or a political party. It is a debate: loud, passionate, even, at times, intemperate. If you really care about reading—or writing—you care about it enough to want it done the right way. "Passion" doesn't mean approving of everything that exhibits passion. It means having standards and being willing to say when those standards are being met and when they are not. And the person who understands this better than anyone is James Wood.

William Deresiewicz

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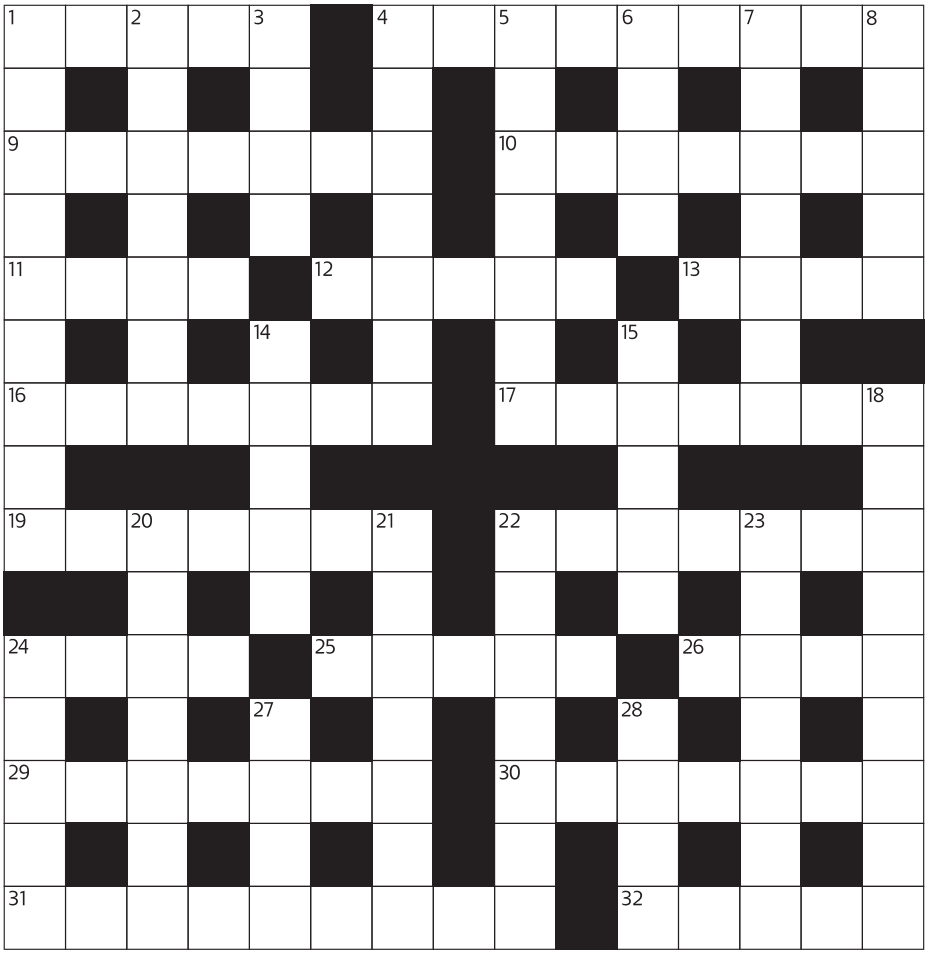

ACROSS

1 see 10

4 Could be someone like Noah, but the inventor of a 12 had a different handle. (9)

9 The heart of things, but Uncle is wrong to go to the country. (7)

10 and **1** Fools around with "Fatha." (Such are pretty tricky!) (12)

11 You at first take to drink in school. (4)

12 The female of certain species, but it's just a sail for the tar. (5)

13 Quiet, Myrna! It's only a stratagem! (4)

16 Look after things, hearing that one is on another continent. (7)

17 Worn in some places in the East—with a right to have words and music around. (7)

19 A thirty-six-inch weapon? No, it's only part of a square sail. (7)

22 Indulging in scathing parody, Critias gets all mixed up. (7)

24 The sort of mush that says what the singer does if she can't recall the words! (4)

25 and **3** down A "meat and potatoes"–plus dish? You might stand Pat for it. (5,4)

26 Some say things will come out in it. Shaw might be responsible for a sort of this! (4)

29 What's found on top with transportation in Chicago? It may be essential to the operation! (7)

30 A pilot article by way of a high spot. (7)

31 Evidently the top officer, in short, gives an evaluation—but one damns the result! (9)

32 A bridge expert may be right, but has gone wrong about it! (5)

DOWN

1 A big block of something goes to your head, on the little boat—which is fine! (5-4)

2 The enclosed part of a plane can bring it up, with how you term a young lady in Paris. (7)

3 see 25 across

4 The USA is wrong when a tree is chopped to pieces by it, which is very plain! (7)

5 They provide a certain amount of cover in Japan, with a Kipling character soon troubled by it. (7)

6 Where some people fight to see what might be on your finger. (4)

7 If this is in the works, you'll do badly in the Graduate Record Exam—get 1,000 to zero coming on up… (7)

8 …and at coming up on a pigpen, you could still consider this very palatable. (5)

14 A graceful swimmer found in an unusual backup of water overseas. (5)

15 After war breaks out, most of the answer is complete rage! (5)

18 Five hundred times as sweet as sugar! (9)

20 The way you might exit a highway takes time to really get your dander up! (7)

21 A real meddler, to cause damage to an area of land. (7)

22 What goes around the middle, perhaps, to say incorrectly how one makes certain dance steps. (7)

23 A genuine high spot offered by the land salesman. (7)

24 Said to cause a certain amount of waste. (5)

27 What the young vocal artist does these days is brought up here—but one might do it in the ring. (4)

28 It could be a bit of noise from your engine, but "pong" makes it game! (4)

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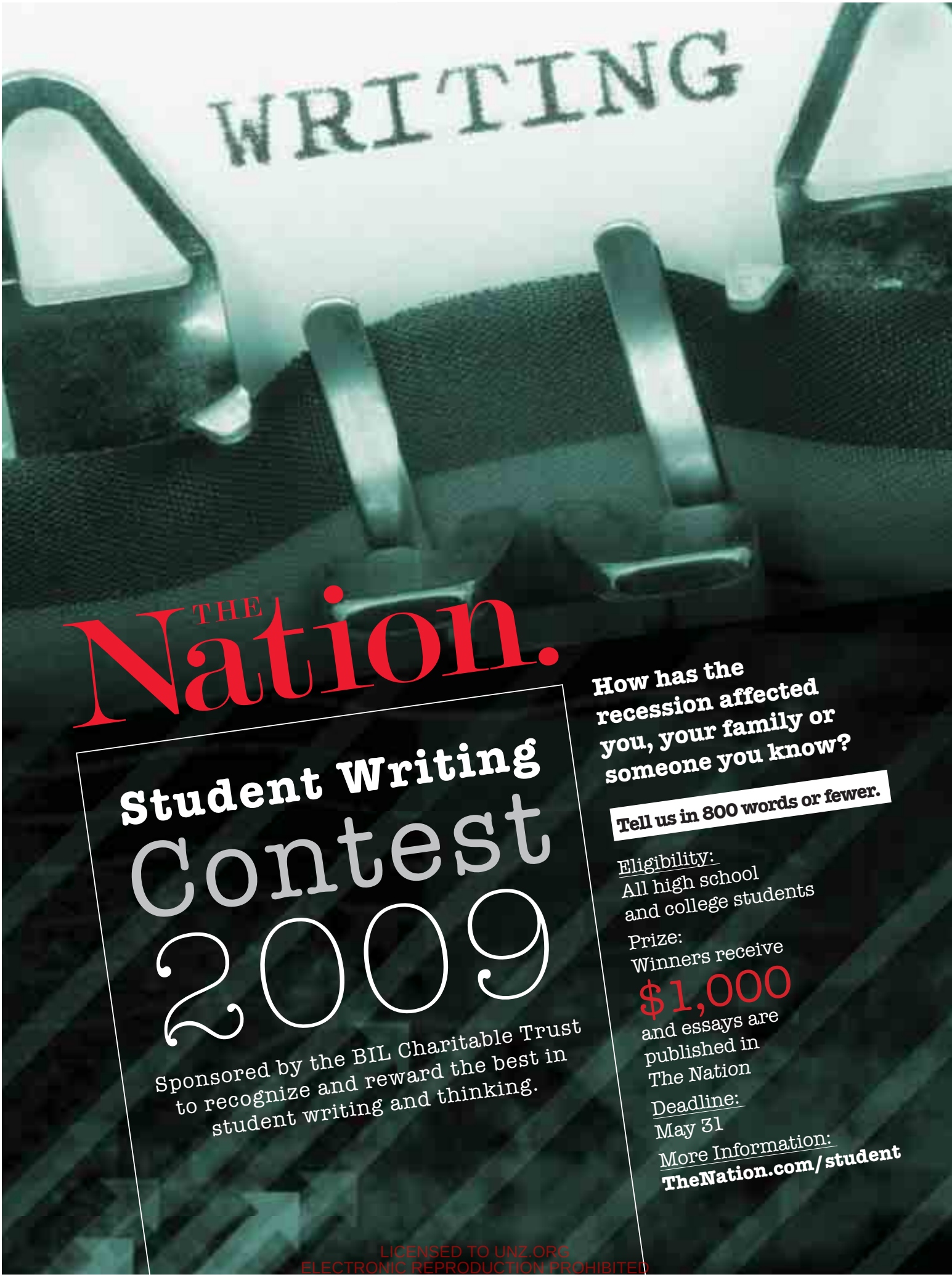

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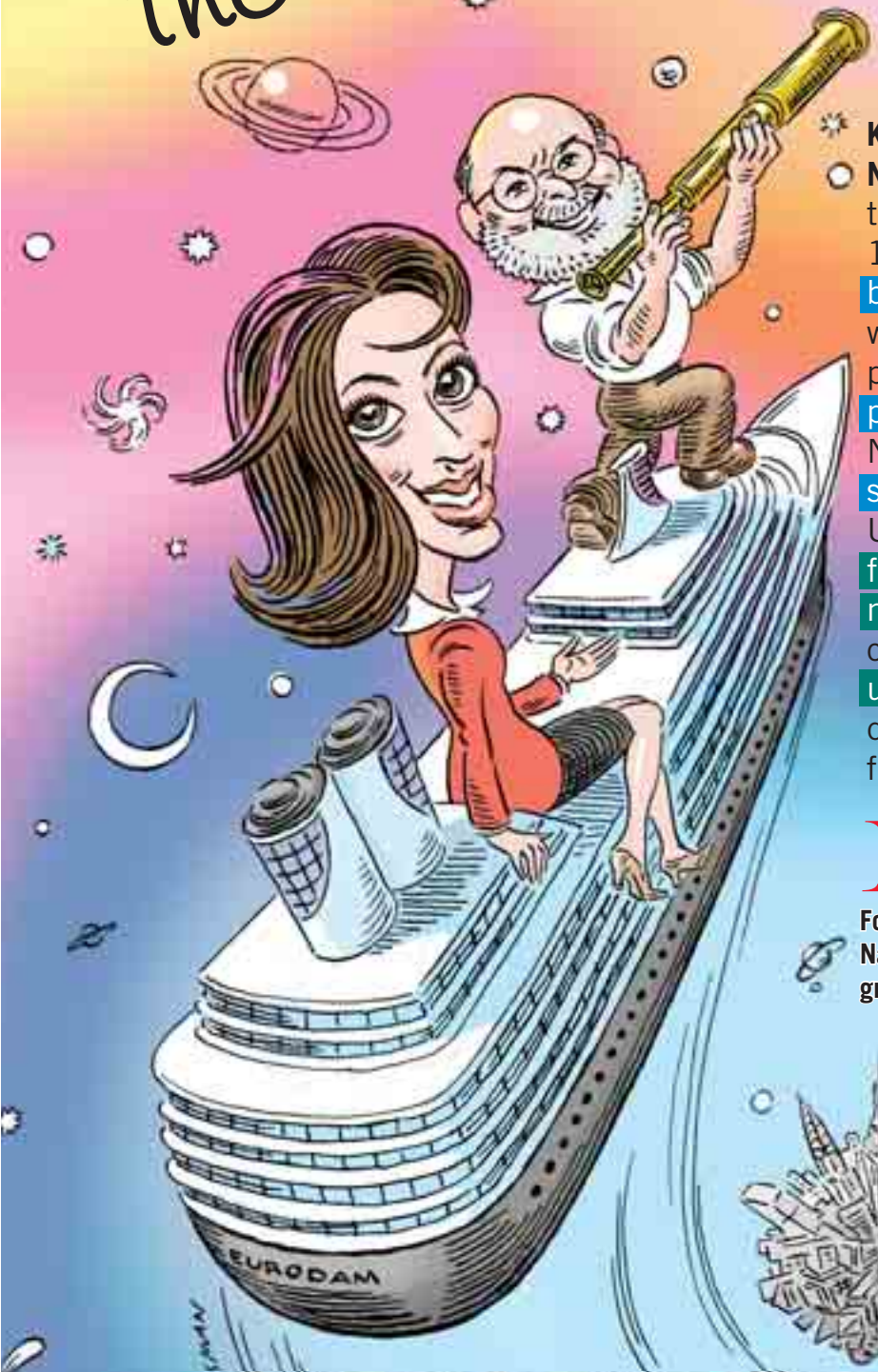

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